

BREATH OF FRESH AIR: SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH
BIBLICAL STORYTELLING WITH INCARCERATED
MEN AND WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

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by
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The “Breath of Fresh Air” project explores the potential for a “Circle of the Word” ministry model to spiritually empower incarcerated men and women while deepening the discipleship of local church members through relationship with imprisoned persons. Circle of the Word is a biblical storytelling workshop structured by peacemaking circle processes. The model was implemented with men at a state prison and women at a county jail. Volunteers from a local church assisted with the jail program. Data results affirm the model’s potential. As a spiritual intervention, Circle of the Word joins the restorative justice movement to end mass incarceration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The “Breath of Fresh Air” project was made possible by the generous and thoughtful help of many people. One of the pleasant surprises I encountered during the course of the project was the number of people who were genuinely interested in the topic and their cheerful willingness to give freely of time and expertise. A few of them are named in the course of this document, but many are not. So I would like here to acknowledge the broader spectrum of individuals who contributed to the “Breath of Fresh Air” project and express my deep appreciation.

My Focus Group mentor, Tom Boomershine, is not only a pioneer in the field of biblical storytelling and performance criticism, but also my husband. We have been vocational as well as life partners for nearly two decades; this doctoral work was a natural extension of our work together. It was his conviction about the positive potential of biblical storytelling for people in prison that planted the seed for the “Breath of Fresh Air” project. Our on-going conversation about the project and its documentation was vital to its success. As faculty mentor, Lisa Hess provided general oversight of my doctoral process and specific evaluation of my written work. Her careful reading of my documents and detailed feedback increased my professional writing skills and certainly improved the quality of this paper.

Our “Biblical Storytelling in Digital Culture” Focus Group was diverse, lively, positive, honest, and motivated. Each of my peers fully engaged the process and fully participated in peer group sessions. We wrestled together through the project discernment process and the various requirements of the doctoral program. We encouraged each other’s individual work and also collaborated as a team. It was one of the most rewarding and productive group experiences of my life. The other members of the Focus Group were: Ron Poisel, Meghan Howard, Brice Thomas, Joyce Johnson, Kathy Culmer, and Elizabeth Green.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank the members of my Context Group who provided a sounding board for my ideas, gave feedback on my writings, and checked in on my progress. Beyond our periodic meetings, when I needed guidance or counsel one or another of them was always available with helpful experience, contacts, and resources to suggest. Three members attended Circle of the Word sessions for first-hand experience of my project: Beth Holten helped me initiate the Jail program, Ezra Knox travelled with me to Chillicothe to attend the prison Circle, and Barbara Blacklock has become a regular co-leader of the jail Circle. The other Context Group members were: Jim Vance, Evette Watt, Richard Green, Mary Hallinan, Tom Applegate, and Sherry Gale.

My three Professional Consultants made invaluable contributions to my learning and to the development and implementation of my project. One reason they were so helpful was because each had expertise in more than one of the knowledge fields required for my work. As a New Testament scholar, an elder in the United Methodist Church, and Program Coordinator for the Horizon Prison Initiative, Richard Boone shepherded my work at Chillicothe Correctional Institution from a variety of critical perspectives. Phil

Ruge-Jones supported my learning from his base of expertise in theology, performance criticism, biblical storytelling, and pedagogy, with the added advantage of experience working with marginalized and incarcerated persons. Mary Hallinan drew on her experience and expertise regarding the criminal law system and spiritual direction to introduce me to the restorative justice movement, train me in peacemaking circle processes, and guide me in relating to incarcerated women.

The newly appointed Chaplain of the Montgomery County Jail—Willie Templeton, Jr.—is not on record as one of my official Professional Consultants, but he certainly functioned like one. With seventeen years of experience as a corrections officer and a lifetime of Christian lay ministry, I learned a great deal through the monthly training sessions he led, as well as through our informal conversations and his professional example. The same could be said of Gye Miller who is a recent graduate of the Doctor of Ministry program at United Theological Seminary and even more recently has been admitted to the Ohio State Bar. As an experienced biblical storyteller and workshop leader, her presence in every Circle session at the jail provided valuable assistance and meaningful evaluation.

I also wish to express my gratitude to the three experienced biblical storytellers from Grace United Methodist Church who overcame their apprehension about going into the jail to serve as assistant Circlekeepers for project implementation: Roberta Longfellow, Susan Bennett, and Myrna Miller. I learned the wisdom of Jesus' practice of sending his disciples out in pairs by going it alone a couple of times. Their keen observations and thoughtful evaluations were both empowering and instructive.

Furthermore, they pioneered an important aspect of the project in relation to local church ministry.

Cortney Haley is one of the most multi-gifted persons I have ever known. I have been fortunate to work with her for the past ten years on a number of projects, including this one. She did everything from drawing scenes for a storylearning exercise to entering data collected from the field. Her own experience as a biblical storyteller and with the incarceration of loved ones was also significant. She accompanied me on my first trip to Chillicothe for the first Circle I led at the prison. Her familiarity with the institution and confidence in my project helped me overcome my own apprehension and get off to a good start.

There would not be much to report on this project if the men and women who attended the Circles had not been so cooperative in participation and so willing to share their experience with others. Initially I had no idea how they would respond to being part of an action research project and whether or not they would agree to data collection. I was impressed by how fully they engaged the process and how seriously they took the work I asked them to do in learning and telling the stories. There was a spirit of generosity about their willingness to serve others through my project which was inspirational.

I have dedicated this dissertation to my stepmother, Shirley Cooper, who believed in my ability to write something substantive and has always encouraged me to do so. Her experience as a dissertation director at the University of Michigan came in handy as I struggled with the conundrum of research approaches. Her more recent experience as a

volunteer working with community organizations enabled helpful conversation relevant to my project.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank my three children: Genevieve, Dan, and Annabelle Richardson. Their enthusiasm for mom going back to school yet again, at this relatively late date in her career, was as surprising and motivating as their strong endorsement of the project I chose to undertake. I did not anticipate and could not have asked for three more lively advocates for my calling to ministry through biblical storytelling with incarcerated men and women.

There are vast numbers of valleys filled with dry bones in the world today,
but for now let us turn our attention to the prisons where a whole multitude of
brothers need that breath of life blown into them.

—George (Leo) Diaz, Sing Sing Correctional Facility, 1998

To my stepmother, Shirley Howard Cooper

INTRODUCTION

I was sharing lunch with my son at a sidewalk café on a beautiful Fall day in Covington, Kentucky. He told me about the frustrating night he had at his work in a local bar. I told him about the work I just started in the prison and jail. I mused aloud about whether or not a biblical storytelling approach to the scriptures would be a source of hope for the men and women incarcerated there. At a pause in our conversation he said something I only half heard: "...breath of fresh air." I looked around and breathed in the beauty of the fall day replying, "Yes, it's really great out today." "No," he corrected, "YOU are a breath of fresh air." I looked at him in amazement. I felt that he had named a deep desire of mine in a new way and defined my vocation.

Months later I sat in a locked, windowless classroom deep inside the county jail with two other "church ladies" and nine female inmates. We spent ninety minutes engaging the story of Jesus' death. It was early April, ten days before Good Friday in 2014. This was our sixth weekly session telling, learning, listening, and connecting with the passion narrative from the Gospel of Mark. Before we sang "Go Now in Peace" I asked what feedback they had about the class. One said, "Very helpful for my soul." Another said, "I learned things I didn't know; it refreshed my memory of things I once knew." A woman, there for the first time that day who turned out to be the mother of several children attending our church, said she got "Detail about my higher power" and

was grateful to meet “representatives from my home church and kids’ Bible study teachers.” But the most striking comment of all was the young woman who simply said, “This time is like a breath of fresh air.”

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world with over two million of its citizens behind bars.¹ Many women and men are incarcerated as a direct or indirect result of the criminalization of select drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and marijuana through the so-called “War on Drugs.” Injustices associated with this war are well documented. The historic oppression of African Americans has continued through this system of mass incarceration.² Prisons have been places more frequently geared for retribution, rather than rehabilitation or restoration. The current trend of prison privatization has exacerbated these problems.

The financial and human cost of mass incarceration is very high at both the individual and communal levels. Recidivism rates soar with nearly a third of those incarcerated returning to jail or prison within five years of release. In the words of a jail chaplain, “People are serving life sentences in installments.”³ They perpetuate on-going suffering in their communities. Most people who are incarcerated are victims themselves, as well as victimizers, caught up in a cycle of poverty, abuse, and criminality that is as difficult to escape as any bricks and mortar prison.

¹ The U.S. Department of Justice reports that at yearend 2013 the number of inmates in state and federal prisons and local jails was 2,220,300. Lauren E. Glaze and Danielle Kaebler, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2013” Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin (Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice: December 2014, NCJ 248479), 2, <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5177> accessed February 9, 2015.

² Michelle Alexander makes the case for this in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012).

³ Chaplain Willie Templeton at a Volunteer Chaplain Meeting June 2014.

How does the body of Christ respond to this complex web of human tragedy?

Clearly there is a need for the church to engage in social action to address the systemic injustices that caused and that maintain mass incarceration. The church needs to function in its prophetic role. At the same time, there is the need for grass roots ministry with specific individuals, fulfilling Jesus' mandate to visit those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46). If the church's work is informed and empowered by the breath of God, those who follow one inmates' exhortation to "Do *something*"⁴ can act with confidence that they are in concert with God's will whether their approach is systemic or interpersonal.

The "Breath of Fresh Air" project is a grass roots approach to ending mass incarceration. It grows out of an intuition that a contribution could be made toward accomplishing this goal through the convergence of biblical storytelling pedagogy, restorative justice principles, and peacemaking circle structure. The ministry model instills and increases hope among incarcerated men and women for meaningful life. It motivates and enables church members to be in incarnational relationship with people directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Aristotle and Cicero identified the role of human breath in effective speech.⁵ The prophets and evangelists recognized the role of divine breath in salvation. Grounded in telling the stories of God, "Breath of Fresh Air" could well be a means of breathing the Holy Spirit into prisoners so that they may live.

⁴ During a three-day immersion experience at an Ohio state prison a group of United Methodists from around the country invited the "men in blue" to give their recommendations for positive action. The men presented a thoughtful list of varied suggestions. Their spokesman concluded the presentation with the tag line, "Do *something*" which quickly became a catchphrase for the group.

⁵ Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009), 108-109.

Chapter One of this document details the ministry focus. There are four aspects. First, there is the social placement of the researcher and key events in her life that led to this project. Second, there is the congregational context for project implementation. Third, there is the context of incarceration. In this section a brief overview of the American criminal justice system is given, contrasting retributive and restorative justice. The peacemaking circle as a practice of restorative justice is discussed. The two locations within the criminal justice system where the project was implemented are described. The final section of Chapter One explicates biblical storytelling as a new paradigm of biblical interpretation and an ancient-contemporary practice of spiritual formation.

Chapter Two provides the biblical foundations for the ministry model through experiential exegesis of select passages from the First and Second Testaments. Experiential exegesis is an approach to the biblical hermeneutics in the new paradigm of biblical study called performance criticism. The chapter begins with a discussion of performance criticism: how and why it developed, what it is, why it is important, how it builds upon and differs from previous methodologies for biblical study. Specific processes of experiential exegesis are described. The second section of Chapter Two applies these processes to two foundational passages for the “Breath of Fresh Air” project: Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 20:19-23. Both of these passages tell about the Spirit of God breathing on God’s despairing people to fill them with new life.

Historical foundations for the project are presented in Chapter Three. This chapter recounts the ways in which the Christian community in Enlightenment England tackled the issues of prison and prisoners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sections will cover the work of Mr. Shute and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the

Wesleys and early Methodism, and the Anglican, John Howard. It will then focus on the Quaker reformer, Elizabeth Fry. The conviction, challenges, and achievements of the church through these Christians inform and inspire the church as it addresses comparable problems in contemporary America.

An exploration of the doctrine of the Word of God in Chapter Four grounds the project theologically through an effort to understand and describe relationships between the Word of God and biblical storytelling. The phrase “Word of God” means different things to different people. Examining its meaning through church history as well as its use by contemporary theologians illuminates the potential significance of the biblical storytelling event for people who are incarcerated and for those who minister with them. This examination also clarifies potential pitfalls to avoid.

Chapter Five turns to the social sciences, drawing on theory and research in the new field of positive psychology, for a theoretical foundation of the ministry model. The goal of positive psychology is to answer an old question: “What makes a good life and a good person?”⁶ Lessons from positive psychology inform the model about transformational learning—moving away from “badness” toward “goodness” in life and character. In particular this document will examine theory and research on hope. Hope is an intangible yet essential aspect of human experience. Imprisonment severely strains the capacity for hope. What is gleaned through a study of hope from the perspective of positive psychology resonates with biblical narrative and is applied in the ministry model.

⁶ C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

Chapter Six documents the action research project itself. It begins by formulating the problem question, stating the purpose of the project, and explaining the research framework. The ministry model is then described in detail, as are the various instruments developed for data collection. Methods used to collect, manage and analyze the data are discussed. Results of model implementation are reported and interpreted.

So let us begin with a deep breath...

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

“Breath of Fresh Air: Spiritual Empowerment through Biblical Storytelling with Incarcerated Men and Women” is focused on a biblical storytelling ministry with people doing time in jail or prison. This chapter will describe the various contexts relevant to a project with this ministry focus. It begins with highlights from the researcher’s spiritual autobiography to shed light on the sources of the particular ministry focus of the project. This section identifies the researcher’s values and interests. It also clarifies the personal context of the researcher with its inherent biases.

The spiritual autobiography is followed by the story of the local church out of which came the call toward the ministry focus and which served as an on-going partner in the “Breath of Fresh Air” project. The third section of this chapter provides a general overview of the American criminal justice system followed by a discussion of a new paradigm called “restorative justice.” The next two sections describe the detention settings where the project was implemented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of biblical storytelling and biblical storytelling workshops.

Spiritual Autobiography

Family Roots

I was born and raised in Big Ten college towns during the fifties and sixties. They provided a safe, yet stimulating climate in which to grow up. My father was a university professor of education administration, my mother a social worker. My father was a classic liberal. His concern for justice and poverty may have been fostered by experiences of the Great Depression as a young man attending college in Chicago. He told me about the lines of men out of work, waiting for soup and bread. In various ways during his career as an educational administrator he served those on the margins.

My mother was raised in Colorado and was deeply influenced by her maternal grandfather, a United Brethren elder who evangelized settlers from high in the Rockies all the way to Denver. As a social worker my mother placed orphans in foster care in Chicago and then in Iowa City where I was born. In the early sixties she directed Planned Parenthood in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A cover article in a national magazine about “The Pill” quoted my mother.

I am proud of my parents for the work they did and grateful for the values they passed on to me. These values were grounded in Christian ethics. My family was mainline, liberal Protestant to the core. We were regular in church attendance and participation, as were many middle class families in Midwestern America at that time. Religious practice in church was taken for granted.

Spiritual Foundations

When I was a child our family attended the Methodist church in town, and then the Presbyterian church. My father was not much for ritual. He liked preaching, but not Communion. I liked Communion, but not preaching. To me the sermon was a painfully long time you had to sit still, be quiet, and listen to something I did not understand. Communion, however, was mysterious and participatory, though an infrequent occurrence in Methodist churches during the fifties. Music and the visual aspects of worship also engaged me and thankfully were a part of every Sunday morning worship.

Sunday school was neither meaningful nor enjoyable for me. My memory is that we sat in a small circle and read handouts. I didn't know the other children and there were no activities to help us relate. It was like school, but less interesting—nothing creative or energizing. The teacher didn't seem to enjoy it, or us, all that much. My early experiences of worship and Sunday School strongly influenced my work in Christian education in a full range of roles since becoming active in church life as an adult. In contrast to much of my experience growing up, I have striven to make Christian spiritual formation for children meaningful, joyful, interesting and as compelling as the Gospel. My goal has been to help children feel affirmed and accepted, with a comfortable sense of belonging to a caring faith community.

My parents' spirituality was actualized more in their concern for social justice than in liturgy or piety. I remember a time after church we drove down to see the shantytown along the banks of the Wabash River. I was so uncomfortable I hid in the back seat of our big, white 1957 Lincoln. When I reflected on this experience years later I wondered how it was for people living in those shanties to see our fancy car driving down

their road. But I also realized the concern and compassion that motivated my parents' Sunday drive through their neighborhood. My parents were not afraid of the poor. The time would come when neither would I be. Liberation theology and Jesus' "option for the poor" speak strongly to me. I find myself at peace working in poor communities, while impatient with rich ones. On the other hand, I don't want to be poor myself. I enjoy the comforts, opportunities, and material benefits of middle class life. I am keenly aware that from a global perspective I myself am rich.

My father read the Bible at breakfast, at least for a while. That ended one Saturday morning, not too long after we got our first television. We were one of the last in the neighborhood to get one because my father disapproved. Among other complaints he said it was too violent, especially the cartoons. Of course he was right about that, but I did not appreciate his view at the time. After making this critique one Saturday morning he insisted I turn off the television. We sat down to breakfast and my father read the story about Jael hammering a tent peg into the enemy king's head. That was the end of our breakfast Bible reading. Years later I remembered that story, and when I found it in the Bible as a young adult, was amazed it was really there. The Bible would prove to be an endless source of amazement for me.

Christmas was my introduction to Jesus. Every December we got out a set of ceramic crèche figures and a wooden stable. I arranged them under the tree. The figures had been hand painted by a relative of my father. They were fun to arrange and intriguing to contemplate. Another Christmas tradition was "Amahl and the Night Visitors." I loved both the story and the music. It helped form my early impressions of Jesus, poverty, people of faith, and what really matters in life.

That impression was reinforced by the movie *Ben Hur*—one of a handful of movies I saw during my childhood. There is an episode in which Judah ben Hur, unjustly condemned by his Roman friend to life as a galley slave, is denied the water he desperately needs to survive a forced march to the sea. A villager bends down to offer a full ladle of water and the soldier begins to rebuke him. We do not see the face of the villager, only his back, but we do see the face of the soldier. It suddenly changes expression in a radical way. The villager doesn't say a thing. As he looks up, the soldier stops midsentence. The expression on his face changes from anger to confusion to fear. It is a classic expression of being awe-struck with “the fear of the Lord.” The soldier backs off, allowing Judah to drink from the proffered ladle. The musical score leaves no doubt that the villager is Jesus.

That scene formed my image of Jesus as one with the power to stop cruelty in its tracks and the compassion to save those in need, whether they looked to him for help or not. I believed then, if not before, that Jesus was for real and was in some way different from every other human who had ever lived. I understood him as different—not in a showy, loud way—but in a quiet, mysterious, holy way. Along with shaping my view of Jesus, the fact that my spiritual life could be so influenced by a movie taught me the power of story and informed my work of integrating biblical story with digital media.

I took piano lessons as a child and learned to play well enough to amuse myself for long periods. One of my favorite books was a collection of folk music and one of my favorite pieces in that collection was “Go Down, Moses.” There were other spirituals in the book and I liked and played them all. I think I learned more Bible and Christian tradition from those spirituals than I did at church. I was impressed by the faith they

expressed and drawn by the history they reflected. We had a few 78 records that I played on an old hi fi record player. One of them had a song called “Strange Fruit” which was about lynching. As a child, I did not really understand the reference to lynching, but I sensed from the melody and the words that it was about something terrible, some great wrong connected with the enslavement of African peoples.

Our family valued and enjoyed the natural world. Gardening, camping, traveling, fishing, and animals were ways we interacted with the environment. With two of his colleagues in the Department of Education at Purdue, my dad purchased twenty-eight acres on Lake Superior, sixty miles north of Sault St. Marie. It was a little peninsula, a little piece of Heaven. We would go up there every August to camp. August is about the only time of year we could enjoy it, as before August the black flies are too vicious and after August it is too cold. But in August our Lake Superior land was magical. Camping trips there provided some of the most wonderful times of my life, experiencing nature in all her glory. My earliest recalled experience of God was on that land, sitting on high rocks, looking down at the waves crashing below and out over the endless lake. I knew God was real, powerful, good, and wondrous. I was filled with peace, joy, awe.

The summer before junior high my family moved to Ann Arbor and joined First Presbyterian Church. It was a large, prestigious church. I attended Sunday school, sang in the Youth Choir, and went through Confirmation. I was bored and ill-at-ease in Sunday School, but liked music. Confirmation consisted of sitting in a classroom full of youth, memorizing the Westminster Catechism. I do not remember any attention to spirituality or to who we were as persons. I did not agree with what we were memorizing. At my one-on-one with the Associate Pastor I asked, “If there were Martians, would God send

them to hell because they never heard of Jesus?” Shortly after being confirmed I stopped attending church. It was the first time in my life I had a choice about church attendance and I readily chose to stay home. However, my choice may have had more to do with my mother’s death than with a negative Confirmation experience.

Prevenient Grace

My parents separated when I was thirteen. One May night the next year I came home after a weekend up north with my father and the house looked strangely dark. As my father parked to drop me off I asked him to wait, sensing something was wrong. I went inside and found my mother upstairs in bed. I couldn’t rouse her. We called our neighbor who was a doctor. An emergency crew came and pumped her stomach, but it was too late. She died from an overdose of barbituates. There was a note my mother had written. The police took it away.

Depression was the culprit that caused my mother’s death, but it would take my own struggle with depression to really understand her act. For many years in dreams I would see my mother and ask her why she left me. As a teenager I didn’t get much help processing my grief from either family or church, but as an adult I became aware of how God was present for me then and since, and has brought people into my life to help me find my way in dark times. At age forty, research for a pastoral care course in seminary informed me about the impact of suicide on family members. I realized the gravity of the experience of my mother’s death and expressed the grief so long held inside.

The most steady and reliable source of personal support during my youth and adult life was the woman my father married the summer before my senior year in high

school. She had been the one on whom I projected all my angry pain about my mother's death. Yet she became not just a friend, not just family, but a trusted mentor. Throughout my life she has been there for me with advice and counsel, encouragement and comfort. Through my relationship with my stepmother I have experienced how God acts to bring goodness out of tragedy and transforms the spirit, sometimes even without invitation. I experienced the redemptive power of God and the prevenient grace manifested in our lives through people who care.

Raising of Social Consciousness

While I was in high school my father took me to a large meeting of Arab students at the University of Michigan. We went with his doctoral student from Egypt. The speaker was Stokely Carmichael and the topic was Black Power. It seemed that my father and I were the only white Americans in the audience. It was a consciousness-raising experience. Dad and I were in Chicago after Dr. King was assassinated and experienced the resulting turmoil there. In Ann Arbor we were close to the burning of Detroit. I read *The Invisible Man*, *Black Like Me*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The year after I graduated, my high school went on "partial martial law" because of racial tension.

These events of my youth made a strong impression and developed my concern for racial justice. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is the prophetic person of faith I admire above all others. I read his writings when I was in seminary and recently revisited them through a small group study of *Strength to Love* and *Where Do We Go From Here?* I was reminded of my deep admiration for him and hope that his teachings and spirit will become more influential in our country, as well as in the church.

I attended the University of Colorado during the Vietnam War and its aftermath. I participated in a candlelight march to protest the bombing of Cambodia. I became disillusioned with our president and government, and impatient with my father's brand of liberalism. Dad had taken me to see Lyndon Johnson speak at the University of Michigan football stadium before the 1968 election when he outlined a plan for The Great Society. But by 1970 that vision was buried under the devastation of an unjust war on the other side of the world. I protested ROTC recruitment on campus. I noticed how the Christians I knew supported it. I was interested in spiritual things—Buddhism, transcendental meditation, midnight Mass on Christmas Eve—but I remained by and large unimpressed with the church.

Vocation

My vocational goal since ninth grade had been to be a doctor on the ship Hope. I had seen a very inspiring movie about it in school and wanted to help poor people by healing their physical ailments. I wanted to be a source of hope for them, or perhaps an answer to their hopes. However, after my first semester in college I knew the medical profession was not for me. I much preferred the humanities to science and found lab work too tedious. I became an education major and earned a degree in Elementary Education. A combination of creativity, fascination with learning, and skill at methodology was evident in my student teaching experiences. I volunteered with a Follow Through program at a nearby town where most of the children were Hispanic and poor.

After graduation I married my college beau and joined him in Chicago where he was engaged in graduate studies. We didn't have a car our first year of marriage so I got

around on a bicycle. I rode across the median, out of the protected university community into the fringes of the ghetto. I found the diversity appealing and the boundary-crossing adventuresome. I was at home in the ivory tower culture of Hyde Park, but I was intrigued by the African American community beyond. This was the world of Jesse Jackson, whose oratory I occasionally heard on the radio. I liked the challenge of going someplace where people were different.

My second year in Chicago I taught preschoolers at a childcare center on the far South Side. The job gave me an immersion experience in middle-class African American culture and a new sense of direction. We moved to Ann Arbor where I earned a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education at the University of Michigan while managing my father's horse boarding business. My father died from cancer that year.

After our year in Ann Arbor we moved to Cincinnati. My husband began his career as a Philosophy professor and I began my vocation as a mother. After our first daughter was born I became a nursery school teacher at a large United Methodist Church. Shortly thereafter I joined as a member. I quit my job when I became pregnant again and was a stay-at-home mom through the birth and early childhood of our third child.

During this time I became active in United Methodist Women and the committee on Church and Society. I taught Sunday school and chaired the Education committee. I was mentored by the Director of Christian Education who encouraged me to seek ordination. She and two pillars of the church nurtured my passion for issues of peace and justice and shepherded my growing involvement with the institutional church.

A two-year Bethel Bible study introduced me to biblical study which led to participation in Walk to Emmaus #9, Table of Deborah. This was a key turning point in

my faith journey. At the Walk I came to understand God as love, experienced the presence of Jesus, and desired to grow in relationship with God. Emmaus was the occasion of a number of significant spiritual experiences in my life, both during the Walk and shortly thereafter. At the end of our Walk there was a “Dying Moments” communion. “Pilgrims” are invited to come to the altar rail and leave something. I came to the rail and offered my doubts. It was not a decision to blindly believe everything about Christianity that was taught, or to refrain from questioning. What I offered was resistance to belief that had been like a wall sealing me in. This wall of doubt prevented enjoyment of God, relationship with Jesus, and acceptance of the church as a viable institution worthy of commitment. I gave it up and left it at the altar. I made space for God to do a new thing in my life. That evening during a quiet time I went outside. It was cool, fall weather with a misty drizzle. I stood under a small tree in a courtyard. Then I experienced Jesus’ presence with me.

After my Walk I wondered where my new-found spiritual energy would lead. Direction came from a conversation with an elderly man whom I had gotten to know on my father’s farm. My stepmother and I drove to visit him in Virginia. After dinner he took us aside and gave an impassioned plea that we address the issue of nuclear war. I took him very seriously, but had no idea what to do. That summer the School of Christian Missions happened to have a study on peace. I was off and running in a direction that eventually led to ordination.

Later that summer, on Hiroshima Day, I interrupted a week at church “Family Camp” to get all five of us engaged in a protest at the gates of the Wright Patterson Air Force Base. Soon afterwards, I spoke up at an Emmaus gathering about peace issues.

Literally shaking with performance anxiety, I bore witness to what it seemed God had told me to do. I began to read the prophets and study the gospels with great energy.

My circle of activity expanded to other issues, other churches, and other denominations. I attended a small group study on *shalom* at a Presbyterian church and learned how peace and justice go hand in hand. I worked with Catholics addressing hunger legislation through Bread for the World. I studied Central American issues and supported the Sanctuary Movement. It was the mid-eighties and we purchased our first computer which facilitated writing. I used it to compose letters to the editor advocating a Comprehensive Nuclear Weapons Test-Ban Treaty and opposing the Star Wars weapon system.

I became an active member of the Church and Society Committee and then the Conference task force on Peace and World Order. With fear and trepidation I became outspoken at church in a way I had never been. I sought ways to put the issues before the congregation. I created an enormous bulletin board display on peace. I received support from the senior pastor and resistance from the some influential members of the congregation. I began attending Christian conferences on peace and justice around the country.

When my youngest was in preschool I was ready to resume my educational career so I took a course in kindergarten education, became certified to teach, and began substitute teaching in the Cincinnati Public Schools—tough work, especially for the inexperienced. I enjoyed the inner city subbing I did, but found myself drawn to work at church rather than schools. One day my husband brought home an invitation to an

exploratory weekend at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I went and decided to attend.

I commuted to Louisville Theological Seminary for two years. I took nine hours in Methodist Studies and found spiritual kinship in John Wesley. I took at least as many hours in Process Theology, which gave me the intellectual base for Christian belief that I needed to counter the Calvinist doctrine I found so untenable. Courses in Christian Social Action and Feminist Thought furthered my education and consciousness-raising with regard to issues of social justice, homosexuality, and gender.

In my thirst to know how and where the church was addressing such issues I attended more conferences and workshops. I went to General Conference in St. Louis, a conference on Faith and Justice in Chicago, and saw Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at a Missions Conference in Louisville. I went to a workshop at Methesco sponsored by the West Ohio Annual Conference task force on Peace and World Order. At that event I had my first introduction to biblical storytelling, learning the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman as a way into the experience of reconciliation with enemies. Over the next few years biblical storytelling became my primary practice of spiritual formation and has been the unifying theme in the various manifestations of my vocation for the past twenty-five years.

A hope that my family would move with me to Louisville was not fulfilled. Therefore, to limit separation, and because of my new-found appreciation for the Wesleyan tradition, I transferred to United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. During my two years at United I was introduced to the Network of Biblical Storytellers by its Executive Director, Pam Moffat. With my two daughters in tow, I attended my first

Annual Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, held in Atlanta. I told Mark 6 as part of an “epic telling” of the Gospel. I became acquainted with an organization that has been central to my vocation ever since. A New Testament course on the Gospel of Mark introduced me to biblical storytelling as a form of biblical study.

A course on spiritual formation taught by Margot Merz introduced me to spiritual direction. Strongly impacted by the experience, I pursued further study of spiritual formation and direction a few years after earning my Master of Divinity degree. I completed an eighteen-month internship program on the Art of Spiritual Direction held at a Jesuit retreat center near Cincinnati, Ohio. It, also, was led by Margot Merz. The “Breath of Fresh Air” project has drawn on what I learned in the course and internship, and also on my experience as a directee.

Sheol

I earned my Master of Divinity degree from United in 1991 and took off with my husband and three children for his sabbatical year. We rented a house in Cary, North Carolina, in the triangle area of Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Durham. I was in the ordination process for the United Methodist Church, but decided after four years in seminary to take a year off from vocational push for the sake of re-grouping with my family. It was an ironic decision. We re-grouped, but not the way I expected. My marriage effectively ended that year and I entered into a limbo state of marital separation.

Those nine months in Cary turned out to be what I came to call “my time in Sheol.” Without faith in God, the ministry of the church, and the discipline of biblical storytelling, I think my spirit might have died along with my marriage. One night I

questioned my faith in God, a faith my spouse did not share. Was he right and I wrong? Then I cried out, “Don’t let me lose my faith. I may lose all else, but I can’t survive without my faith!” My prayer was heard.

I had a spiritual director, a nun in Durham. She helped me to pray—first with Mary the mother of Jesus, who like myself had to wait, unable to control events and with a very uncertain future. Sr. Chris also directed me to Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit. Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” She helped me mature as a Christian. Once while I was telling her what was going on in my personal life I suddenly cried out, “How can this be happening? I’ve done everything right all my life!” I stopped, having heard what I had just said. I knew, then, how pervasive in my spirit was self-righteousness. It was an eye-opening moment of insight. God was answering my prayer not to lose faith, but to grow in faith.

I would go to Duke several days a week after taking my children to school. The walk to campus from where I parked was beautiful, lush with flora. I could see the beauty, but it did not bring happiness. My heart was broken and I didn’t know if I would ever feel happy again. One time on that walk I saw myself at the bottom of a pit, with my legs cut off at the knees, bleeding stumps. I was trying to get up the walls of the pit, but they were slimy so I would just slide back down. Then Jesus was with me down there in the pit. I relaxed and felt safe. This was an answer to another prayer: to grow in personal relationship with Jesus. The birth narrative and the psalm came to life. God was with me, Emmanuel, in Sheol.

Another time, as I walked through the woods in Cary, listening to a lecture I had on tape from a New Testament course, I saw a butterfly dancing in the sunlight. It was a sign of resurrection to me. It was God's personal message that something good would come in my life, that I would be happy again. I felt lightness then, and believed the promise. God was present with me in many ways that year. The church and people of faith came to my assistance. Both the faith community at Duke Chapel and First United Methodist Church in Cary welcomed and supported me, and gave me places to function, learn, serve, make friends. I learned first-hand how the church can support a person through hard times, bringing hope and encouragement and opportunity for growth.

Go and Tell

I moved back to Cincinnati in June of 1992, in a state of marital separation that eventually resulted in divorce. I was unprepared for this change and full of anxiety, both for myself and for my children. The future looked bleak and I did not know what to do.

I had a friend, Weldon Nisly, who was a Mennonite pastor for whom I had great respect as a man of faith and integrity. He and I were in a small guild of biblical storytellers. He was active in promoting peace and justice in many ways, including going to meet the enemy. Inspired by a call to boundary-crossing made in an address to the Network of Biblical Storytellers by its founder, he had helped organize a biblical storytelling trip to the Soviet Union. (Some years later he also traveled to Iraq on a peace mission, just before the American bombing of Baghdad.) One day I went to Weldon and told him how afraid I was all the time. I asked him, "What should I do?" And he answered, "Stay close to Jesus."

It seems like simplistic, pietistic talk. Coming from someone else it probably wouldn't have meant much to me, but coming from Weldon it meant everything. I clung to that thought and brought it to mind when fear overwhelmed me. Learning and telling myself biblical stories became the main way in which I stayed close to Jesus. Telling them to others gave me an experience of empowerment and of the Spirit at work in the world.

Thus began the last two decades of my life, in which the internalization and telling of biblical stories played the central role in my spiritual and vocational life. I began a series of jobs that brought together biblical storytelling digital culture. I was a research assistant for the American Bible Society's Multimedia Translation Project, Coordinator for the Network of Biblical Storytellers, and Assistant Director of Christianity and Communications at United. I was Associate Pastor of Mason United Methodist Church for two years where I integrated biblical storytelling into local church ministry. During that time I married again and resolved to concentrate on biblical storytelling.

Together my husband Tom and I established a not-for-profit corporation called GoTell Communications whose mission is "to equip people to discover and tell biblical stories as a spiritual discipline for embodying Jesus' way of peace in the world." Since its incorporation in 1998 I have served as Director. This work has involved production projects, presentations, and educational missions to cities in the United States and around the world. The position has embraced work for the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Coad Media in the United Kingdom, UMR Communications in Dallas, and two local church congregations.

Divorce and remarriage impeded my journey toward ordination. By 1996 I had been in the ordination process for nearly the time limit. When the Conference interview team rejected my bid for Elder's orders I was ready to end the journey. However, when I communicated my intent to withdraw from the process, Conference leadership asked that I reconsider.

Serendipitously, the Order of Deacons had just been established. The new understanding of Deacon in the United Methodist Church was a much more fitting vocation for my sense of calling. I had never made peace with itinerancy, nor had I felt called to local church pastoral ministry. With Stephen as a model (Acts 6-7), the new United Methodist Deacon is ordained to a ministry of Word and Service. The Deacon is to be a bridge between the church and the community, responsible for identifying his or her own context of ministry.

This made sense to me, and to the Board of Ordained Ministry which affirmed my calling at the next Conference interview. Already ordained as Deacon under the old polity, the culmination of my clerical status was admission to the West Ohio Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in full membership. The congregation of Mason UMC created a beautiful "Go and Tell" banner for the occasion—a loving gift that defines my ministry to this day.

Light in Darkness

There are many ways in which my three children have shaped and strengthened my spirit and deepened my relationship with God. These include experiences of grateful joy at the gift of their lives, delight and wonder as I watch them grow, dependence on

faith to endure the pain of their struggles, and humility caused by the challenges of parenting. The hardest parental challenge I faced was the thirteen-month incarceration of my son. His stepfather and I were in Florida, having just completed a lecture tour, when the call came that my twenty-year-old had been arrested for burglary. It was the darkest night of my life. My husband told me Psalm 23 and coached me to recite it for myself over and over again. That was how I survived the night and the days to come. The psalms later informed the letters I wrote my son and gave him strength to endure his time in prison.

The arrest, trial, and visits in jail and prison were hard experiences of an alien world. They took me into unwelcome places of sorrow, shame, and remorse. But the Spirit of God was there. Whatever he had done, I still loved my son very much. And I knew he needed me. I found we could be in relationship through letters and visits. I came to understand more about how God loves us. Whatever we do, wherever we are, God adapts to meet us as we are. Like Paul, I came to be convinced “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). There is always light in the darkness.

Children's Ministries

Throughout my thirty plus years of active church involvement I almost always have been involved in Christian Education with children. When we returned to Dayton after four years in Dallas, we located at First United Methodist Church where I served as a consultant for starting a digital culture worship service. It wasn't long before I began to

lead Children's Moments every Sunday and then to teach Sunday school with a wonderful woman from Nigeria. Her children were in the class along with children of a large family from Liberia. Her husband frequently told me in his Nigerian accent, "You have a heart for the children." When both families moved out of town, I looked for another church. I knew I must be in a church with children.

I landed at Grace United Methodist Church, largely because of the photos of white and black children together on the Grace website and because the congregation had just approved turning its education wing into a Y Child Care Center. I led a program for mothers on a multimedia biblical storytelling resource I had helped develop, launched a multimedia component in worship, taught Sunday school, led Children's Moments, and wound up chairing the Children's Ministries team. In June of 2009 I took the position of Director of Children's Ministries in the wake of the sudden departure of the acting Director.

The Director of Children's Ministries position at Grace was challenging, energizing, and in many ways the fulfillment of a lifelong calling to work with children. I sought to balance attention between nurturing the children within the Grace family and outreach to other children in the community. I also advocated attention to issues impacting children's welfare, such as education and protection from abuse. Much of my work with children involved teaching and telling biblical stories, often using digital technology. Ministry with children at Grace led me to ministry with prisoners.

Prison Ministry

One evening after a Wednesday night children's program I was walking down the hallway with a nine-year old who regularly attended Grace. She was an alert and thoughtful child, a good student, and a positive presence in our community of children. She lived with her grandmother whom I had come to know and respect. As we walked along, she mentioned her mother and I asked her whereabouts. She told me her mother was in the army. Soon afterwards her grandmother told me that the mother was actually in prison and that her granddaughter was ashamed to tell me the truth. She said it had happened while I was overseas on a mission trip. Now the mother had been taken from prison to the county jail. She wished a pastor would visit. I did not even know where the jail was or how to go about a visitation, but I heard that wish as a call from God.

I went downtown to the jail and found out how to get authorized to make pastoral calls. Thanks to fast action on the part of the Board of Ordained Ministry, the very next day I went back for a visit. The visiting place in the county jail was empty. It was a little room with two stools facing two thick windows, with cubicles on the other side of the windows and handsets to communicate. I was unsure what to do, whether to notify someone I was there or to go through the door next to the windows. I did not know whether the woman would want to see me, a stranger. I sat down on a stool and waited.

She came before long and I introduced myself. She was distressed, afraid, and confused. She did not understand why she had been transported from the prison to the jail. She cried. I did not know what to say. I felt inadequately prepared for pastoral conversation, but I trusted that I was supposed to be there and stumbled along asking a

question or two. I listened and tried to understand her words which was difficult because of her emotion and our different patterns of speech.

After my visit, I was aware of the flood of memories coming back from the time I had visited my son in the Hamilton County Jail. I remembered the emptiness, and his tears. I remembered the pain of not being able to touch him as he cried, and of having to leave him there, alone with his remorse and fear. I allowed the memories to inform my present rather than to rule it. I knew that the experience with my son would prove useful now. It was a sign of God's hand in things, for I believe God works like that—coaxing value out of the messes we make in life.

The following week at church the nine-year-old and I talked about my visit with her mother. It was a good talk. She wanted to know how her mother was. I told her she was sad and missed her. She wanted to know if I thought she looked like her mother. I said, "Yes, you are pretty like your mother." The next time I visited her mother was after she returned to the Dayton Correctional Institution. It had been converted just months before from a men's prison to a woman's prison in order to accommodate the growing population of female felons. We visited in the same room where I had visited my son a dozen years before—a strange feeling. I knew the place and more or less what to expect, so I was comfortable with the process of visitation there. But I was in for some surprises.

Initially the thing that surprised me was the way in which my ministry with children, which had been so joyful for me and fruitful for the church, had brought me to this place that intersected in such a powerful way with one of the hardest of my life experiences. I would never have guessed that such a hard time could one day be empowering. I had learned during my son's year of incarceration that even in prison there

can be laughter and joy in relationship—that love is not stopped by bars, guards, or razor wire. I had learned that I could manage the intimidating atmosphere of jails and prisons. I knew that the Holy Spirit was just as active in the prison as anyplace else, and that if ever there was a place where Jesus’ friendship is needed, where the Word of God is needed, this was it. In going to the prison, I had a strong sense of God’s presence and guidance, of being led and not worrying about what happens next, what will I say, or what should I do. In subsequent visits wondered about how to teach biblical stories in prison.

One day we received a letter at church from the mother of two children who had come with their grandmother for breakfast on Sunday morning. I had helped them get involved in Sunday school, Children’s Worship and other children’s programs at Grace by providing transportation. But suddenly they stopped attending. When I went to their house for a visit, neighbors said they had left but had no idea where they had gone. The letter we received nearly a year later from their mother explained that she was in prison. She wrote that her infant son had died of SIDS while she was in jail. She gave the name and phone number of the guardian who had custody of the two children. She asked if we would again bring them to church.

I had conflicting emotions reading the letter. On the one hand I was delighted to hear about the children and the prospect of their returning to Grace. On the other hand I was saddened to hear the troubles they and their mother had been through. I was also overwhelmed with the sense of God’s Spirit at work in our lives. I had sent a picture of a girl singing in worship to her mother at the prison. She had shown this to a friend. The conversation went something like this:

“What church is that?”

“Grace.”

“Is that on Salem Avenue?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have an address you could give me?”

“Yes.”

We didn’t have that many children attending Grace, only about twenty total with a handful every week. How could it be that two mothers in such a small community of children were incarcerated? And that they should connect with me in this way?

When I thought about it, I realized it was more than two. It just was not talked about much. Others had fathers in prison. I have begun to learn the systemic reality of mass incarceration as a racial justice issue and an expression of “the new Jim Crow.” *The New Jim Crow* is the title of a recent book by Michelle Alexander (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012) which makes the case that mass incarceration is a new form of racial discrimination and oppression. This caught my attention in relation to my life-long appreciation for the African American experience. It also relates to the people I minister with in my work at Grace and its surrounding neighborhoods.

Since 2004 I have helped lead the Cincinnati-Dayton Guild of the Network of Biblical Storytellers. We meet monthly to encourage one another’s vocation as biblical storytellers and to plan biblical storytelling programs. For quite some time we tossed about the idea of telling biblical stories to prisoners, who we thought could benefit by hearing and learning scriptures told by heart. As we became more intentional about following through with that idea, we invited the chaplain of the Montgomery County Jail to attend our monthly meeting. He came in September of 2011.

The part of the chaplain’s presentation that particularly caught my attention was his explanation of the motives behind his work, why he chose to work with people in jail.

One of his motives was pragmatic, the other spiritual. The pragmatic motive was that almost everyone in jail, sooner or later, will return to the community. It would be better for society if they returned more whole and healthy rather than less. His spiritual motive was the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: "...for I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me..." These words of Jesus conclude the recorded history of Grace Church.¹ They are also a reminder of John Wesley's mandate to his followers to visit in prisons, as he himself regularly did. A biblical storytelling program at the Montgomery County Jail did not materialize at that time, but a seed was planted.

September 2011 was also the occasion for my initial involvement with biblical storytelling in a state prison. Late in the month Grace celebrated its Bicentennial. The keynote speaker was a retired United Methodist bishop, the Rev. C. Joseph Sprague, who grew up in Dayton and has known Grace well "from afar." In his talk the bishop referred to a "pipeline to prison" for African American boys who cannot read at grade level by third grade. This caught my attention since I have been involved with a "Reading Buddies" program at the nearby neighborhood school. I worked with third grade boys who could hardly read at all. Were these young ones headed for prison?

The bishop also mentioned an interfaith residential program for incarcerated men called the Horizon Prison Initiative. The outcome of post-keynote conversation was an invitation to join a group exploring development of an academic program for Horizon graduates. My agenda was to have a course on biblical storytelling included. Wearing my

¹ *Pilgrims of Grace, Volume II: A History of Grace United Methodist Church of Dayton, Ohio 1948 to 1976* (no publishing information).

GoTell hat, I joined the planning group for what would become the “Horizon Academy.”

We regularly met with the planning team and “men in blue.”² I helped design a course on Sacred Storytelling. It proved to be another truncated effort, but also another seed sown.

The sessions with the men in blue, including a biblical storytelling workshop, were powerful experiences of the Spirit of God hard at work in the world, seeking to transform lives. The quiet faith of the planning team as well as the articulate faith of the men in blue was inspiring. I felt, as I did at the women’s prison, that this was a place where I had something meaningful to offer and also where I would receive something meaningful. The convergence of these varied circumstances relating to prison ministry resulted in doctoral studies focused on biblical storytelling in digital culture and to the “Breath of Fresh Air” project.

Grace UMC

The “Breath of Fresh Air” project focused on ministry with incarcerated men and women. Its primary base of support was a local church congregation: Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. The call toward this model arose from ministry in the context of Grace Church. Grace undergirded foundational work while possible detention settings were being explored. The congregation helped with program development, implementation, and evaluation. It provided on-going spiritual support and accountability. Grace also presented the challenge of bridging the gap between the local church and the community, between “respectable” middle class folk and people living behind bars.

² So named because of the blue, prison-issued clothes worn by inmates.

The history and fortunes of Grace Church dovetail that of its community. Its story is as old as the city in which it resides. The first 180 years of the Grace story is well documented in two volumes entitled *Pilgrims of Grace*. 1796 was the year that thirty-six people traveled from Cincinnati to the mouth of the Mad River and established a settlement. That settlement became Dayton, Ohio. One of the first to arrive was William Hamer, a Methodist class leader. The first religious services in Dayton were held in his log cabin, and the first sermons were preached in 1798 by a Methodist elder from Kentucky named John Kobler. On New Year's Day, 1799 he wrote in his journal:

Preached in Dayton to a mixed company of traders from Detroit. Some Indians, French and English. I lifted up my voice like a trumpet and cried loud and spared not. Laid before them the corruption of their wicked hearts and the fearful consequences of a life of sin in such pressing terms that many of them looked wild and stood aghast, as if they would take to their heels.³

These were the days of fire and brimstone preaching. Rev. Kobler was apparently quite skilled in this homiletical style.

By 1811 Dayton had becoming “a thriving community of 383 people.” In late September of that year Bishop Francis Asbury preached at the Courthouse to a large congregation, including 24 members of the Methodist society. By the end of the year there were 75 members and a decision was made to build a church.⁴ Grace dates its founding to this event; hence, the celebration of its bicentennial in September of 2011. This wooden frame church, painted red, was built near Third and Main on land donated by Dayton's founding father, D.C. Cooper.

³ L.G. Battelle, *Pilgrims of Grace* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1949), 21.

⁴ Battelle, 30.

The first official church board was organized four years later. Its initial business provides one of few references to relationship between Grace and African Americans: “Ezra Davis, a colored man, was appointed to sweep the meetinghouse, keep it clean, to open and shut it, light the candles, make the fire, cut wood, etc. at rate of \$1.00 per month.”⁵ In volume one of *Pilgrims of Grace*, this description is illustrated by a sketch of Mr. Davis with a broom at the church door. The only other person of color depicted in either volume is also a maintenance staff person, Mrs. Richard Offutt (Bea), 1976.⁶

In the mid-sixties a prominent African American couple join Grace and have remained active members to this day. For a long time, they were the only African American members. The first African American on the pastoral staff was a student pastor, Steve Baber, much beloved by the youth, who was hired by Rev. Bryan Palmer Smith in 1996. As recalled by Barbara Blacklock, “He was wonderful, the kids loved him...they were all white kids.”⁷ According to Mrs. Blacklock, Baber returned to his home conference in Washington state following graduation and served a church in Seattle. Until recently, Grace has been an affluent white institution with very little ethnic or economic diversity.

During its pioneer years Grace evidenced the mix of personal piety and social action characteristic of the early Methodist movement. In 1815, with leadership by Methodist women, the “Dayton Female Charitable and Bible Society” was formed. Its members were “profusely praised” in “a charity sermon” preached at the Methodist

⁵ Batelle, 31.

⁶ *Pilgrims of Grace, Volume II*, 14. There are many illustrations and photographs in these volumes of staff and congregation; it is possible that a person of color was overlooked.

⁷ Interview with Barbara Blacklock, November 18, 2012.

Meeting House as “being noted for their benevolence and good work.”⁸ For their part, that year the men formed “The Moral Society” whose mission was “to suppress vice, to promote order, morality and religion and more particularly to countenance support and assist magistrates in the faithful discharge of their important duties in enforcing the law against Sabbath breaking, profane swearing and other unlawful practices.”⁹

In 1818 the first Methodist Sunday School was organized which taught both adults and children to read (there were no public schools yet).¹⁰ In 1822 the Dayton Foreign Mission Society was formed, with membership dues of fifty cents, “payable in money, clothes, garden truck, furniture or groceries to be sent to the Indians.” The first Temperance Society was established in 1829. For the next century Methodists would be active in advocacy for Sabbath laws and Prohibition. They would also continue to be active in education and charity.

Along with other downtown buildings, Grace suffered the mud and muck left behind by the waters of the 1913 flood. Commentary on this communal calamity in *Pilgrims of Grace* includes one of its few references to economic and racial diversity: “Stores out of the flood district were ordered closed so that citizens were compelled to get in the bread line, rich and poor, black and white.” A footnote on this phenomena hints at a positive attitude toward diversity while denoting little sense that it might be a

⁸ Batelle, 32.

⁹ Batelle, 33.

¹⁰ Batelle, 34.

congregational responsibility to address structural social issues: “Too bad that it requires a catastrophe to make men realize they are all brothers.”¹¹

At the time of the First World War, the effort to prohibit the sale of alcohol became a crusading passion for Grace Church. Many must have shared Batelle’s judgment that alcohol is “the greatest of social evils” and attacked its legality with much the same fervor as some Christians today attack legalized abortion or homosexual marriage. In those days, Dayton was one of only eight “wet” counties in Ohio, while the other eighty were “dry.” According to Batelle, “In Dayton the fight was bitter.” Grace became a headquarters for dry campaign work preceding the 1917 election. The fiery preaching of Dan McGurk fueled congregational commitment to the cause of temperance. Reports on the impact of his sermons are reminiscent of violent response to John Knox’s sermons in Scotland during the Reformation. According to Pilgrims of Grace, “One felt like going out and throwing brickbats at these ‘hell holes’ after hearing McGurk.”

From today’s vantage point of a region suffering many ill effects of drug and substance abuse, the concern over alcohol a century ago was clearly warranted. Yet at the same time, the failed “War on Drugs” of these times also parallels the failed policy of Prohibition in those times. Rhetoric that rallies groups to violence is not consistent with the way of Jesus. Identifying alcohol as “the greatest social evil” is similarly inconsistent with Jesus’ teaching and ministry. What about war, Jim Crow, poverty, economic exploitation? It is hard not to wish that more religious fervor, then and now, would go into evils more closely aligned with Jesus’ concerns.

¹¹ Batelle’s footnote also exemplifies the dated assumption that “men” and “brothers” adequately reference humanity.

By 1919, Dayton's population had grown to 151,000. Battelle relates the changes at Grace: "The majority of [Grace] members had moved to Dayton View, Oakwood, or some other place further from the center of town." The church followed suit. In 1921 it moved into its current Dayton View edifice. Dayton View was an affluent neighborhood with magnificent homes. The Methodists of Dayton erected a church that fit right in: "The Grace Methodist Episcopal Church, 1001 Harvard Blvd., set on terraces, has been described as the finest church building in Methodism."¹² At the time, it was located at the edge of the residential area. The front door faced Harvard and Broadway. Broadway was the street that ran from Third Street near the Wright brothers' bicycle shop, over Wolf Creek and up through Dayton View. At the top of Broadway, sitting on the hill like a castle overlooking its kingdom, was Grace Methodist Episcopal Church.

Grace ascended to its lofty location and remained one of the most prestigious churches in the Conference for the period covered by *Pilgrims of Grace*. Two bishops came out of Grace Church. The membership throughout the 1950's and 60's was over 4,000. As described by retired Bishop C. Joseph Sprague on the occasion of Grace's bicentennial in September 2011:

Grace, along with three other large metropolitan congregations located in Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo, were Conference trend-setters in innovative Christian Education, state-of-the-art Early Childhood Education, eloquent preaching, and the very best of traditional church music.¹³

Older members remember those glory days fondly.

¹² Batelle, 125. Battelle quotes from page 278 of *The Ohio Guide*.

¹³ C. Joseph Sprague, "That Which Is Good and Required of Grace to Enter God's Preferred Future" (paper presented at the 200th Anniversary Celebration Luncheon of Grace United Methodist Church, Dayton, OH, September 25, 2011).

Things changed in the 1970s. The membership of Grace dropped by almost 1,000 from the beginning of this decade until 1976 when the second volume of *Pilgrims of Grace* was written.¹⁴ Bussing was instituted to integrate the schools and white flight altered the demographics of Dayton View. The relationship between the neighborhood and the church changed. The front door was locked and the back door was guarded. Wednesday after-school music programs for children and youth had to shift to Sunday morning because the children and youth of the church no longer lived in the area. Here is how Barbara Blacklock, a member of Grace for fifty years describes what happened:

The biggest change came and the biggest fear came in about 1976 or '77 when the schools in Dayton were integrated by bussing. People fled the area, fled the church. They were afraid of the location. Major white flight happened and it affected the church greatly. A lot of the families moved to the suburbs and to different churches. They didn't want their kids in the schools where they were bussed.¹⁵

The United Methodist Church did not do much to help Grace transition with the times. Mainline denominations did not invest in urban churches like Grace had become. Its attention and resources focused on suburban church growth.

The report on Grace Church 1948-1976 is bookended with thoughtful reflections on how the Grace story might carry faithful witness to the Gospel into an uncertain future. The front matter includes this analysis:

The challenge facing Grace Church today is not one of increasing membership, it is rather a problem of seeing that our membership becomes active; of giving our children and grandchildren a sound religious education; of adapting our ministry, clergy and laity, to a changing neighborhood; of educating our membership to the

¹⁴ This trend has continued for the following 35 years. The membership today is 10% of what it was in 1976.

¹⁵ Interview with Barbara Blacklock, November 18, 2012

needs of the world as well as the needs of those about us; it is a problem of this church exerting leadership in all that is right and good in this community.¹⁶

Bishop Sprague's perception of Grace around this time suggests that the congregation accepted its challenge, but without all the results for which they hoped:

Sixth, a snapshot from a then Chicago bishop, who witnessed Grace move from guards to greeters in your parking lot, as the drawbridge was lowered across the moat, while mission and ministry were reformulated, hoping against hope that if this were done sensitively and well, they would come. But, alas, despite the best of intentions and much creativity, they did not come. Too much old water had swirled in the moat.¹⁷

That was nearly two generations ago. A third volume of *Pilgrims of Grace* has not yet been composed.

The unwritten years of 1977-2014 have been years of steady decline in membership and increasing concern about budget. Nevertheless, significant ministry by pastors and laypersons, both inside and outside the church walls, has continued. Some ministries happened as established Grace programs; others resulted from individual initiatives. Marion Muse Rutan's role in establishing Mercy Manor is a prime example of the latter. Marion was very active in the United Methodist Women. She had been president of the local unit at Grace and also of the Conference UMW. She was also active in Church Women United. She and her friend Joan Brown were both CWU officers. On the way back from a Columbus meeting they discussed how the limited funds of Dayton's chapter went to various charities. Marion gave voice to a thought she had been entertaining for some time: "I thought it would be nice if we had a charity of our own that

¹⁶ *Pilgrims of Grace, Volume II*, front matter.

¹⁷ Sprague.

we could sponsor and work with.”¹⁸ Subsequently, Mrs. Brown made contact with Sr. Jean Foppe who was coordinator of the Volunteer Chaplaincy Program at the Montgomery County Jail, and in 1992 a transitional home for women recently released from prison was established. Marion drew her vision for this home from the epistle of James. It was called Mercy Manor, “where mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). In the twenty years since its founding Mercy Manor has served over 310 women, providing housing for more than 160.¹⁹ Marion was a founding member of the board.

What is the congregation of Grace like now, and what is the character of its neighborhood? Grace is located in the 45406 zip code area. According to demographic data from the 2010 census, the population of this five square mile area is about 27,500. The median home value is \$66,300 and the median gross rent \$444. The majority of residents live in detached homes. Eighty percent of the people living in this zip code are African American. The highest number of households earn \$30,000 or less. Most residents are English speaking, with Spanish being the next most common language.²⁰

Edison PreK-8 School opened its doors a mile down Broadway from Grace Church. It is the neighborhood public school serving the Grace neighborhood and thus serves as a good indicator of the character of the neighborhood. According to the 2010-2011 School Year Report Card to the Ohio Department of Education, the average daily student enrollment is 401 of which 96% are “black, non-Hispanic” and 100% are

¹⁸ Interview with Marion Muse Rutan, December 13, 2012.

¹⁹ “Mercy Manor: Reshaping Lives,” accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.mercymanordayton.com/496585/about-us/>.

²⁰ “MapsZipCode,” 45406 Zip Code Map, Demographics and Local Services, accessed November 29, 2012, <http://www.mapszipcode.com/ohio/dayton/45406>.

“economically disadvantaged.” With regard to third grade achievement, barely half the children are reading at grade level. Danielle Dabbs, the neighborhood site coordinator at Edison in 2012, reports that the school is “100% free and reduced lunch, and all our students do get breakfast as well plus after-school snacks for academic after-school programs.” She has daily contact with the children and has had “a lot of students mention incarcerated parents or relatives.” Her rough estimate is that “about 1 in 4 have a parent who is currently in jail or has been at some point.”²¹

The congregation that built the church at Salem and Harvard was large, affluent, and young, as was the neighborhood in which it was built. The congregation which sustains Grace today is relatively small, of modest means, and predominantly old. Some members live in the adjoining neighborhoods, others further out. Most are employed in, or retired from, professional vocations with middle-range incomes. As of the close of 2011, Grace reported 437 professing members, of which 357 were white, 70 were African American, and 10 were Asian. Ethnic diversity had doubled: The previous year 30 African American members were reported and 5 Asian.²²

The average attendance at Grace worship services in 2011 was 146. The average weekly attendance for all ages in Sunday School was 42, doubling the previous year. The total number of persons participating in Christian formation groups was 115. The number of persons served by community ministries for daycare and/or education was 90 and the

²¹ Email exchange with Danielle Dabbs, December 13, 2012.

²² Data from “Worksheet for Table I of the Local Church Report to the Annual Conference” for Statistical Year 2011.

number of persons served by community ministries for outreach, justice, and mercy was 1110 (both significant increases over the previous year).²³

To gain more insight into the opinions of the current membership about Grace and its ministry a questionnaire was developed using forms from *Studying Congregations*²⁴ as well as questions related to the “Breath of Fresh Air” project. The questionnaire was administered to 35 individuals. Results indicate general satisfaction with the worship and ministry of the church. There were a variety of responses about what might be improved. Quite a few mentioned the need for more emphasis on Christian education programs for adults and helping members deepen their personal and spiritual relationship with God. There was also considerable variation in responses regarding congregational identity.

The questions regarding biblical storytelling and ministry with incarcerated persons were less ambiguous. 88% responded affirmatively when asked if they paid more attention when scriptures are recited than when they are read; 85% preferred scriptures be told by heart than read in worship.²⁵ 83% responded to the question “Which statement best represents your feelings about incarcerated persons?” by answering, “Church congregations should be involved with incarcerated persons.”²⁶ This is interesting given that prison ministry has not been a significant part of Grace institutional history.

²³ Data from “Worksheet for Table I of the Local Church Report to the Annual Conference” for Statistical Year 2011.

²⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman et al., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 241-244.

²⁵ The scriptures have been told by heart every Sunday for the past three years. The group which provides this ministry of the Word is called “Grace by Heart.”

²⁶ A distant second was the statement “Leave their treatment to the proper authorities.” The other two choices were “There are many other needs to address that are more important” and “I would rather not think about people who are in jail or prison” each of which was chosen by one person.

Whether or not the Grace congregation in the coming years will be able to afford the cost of maintaining its current building and have the critical mass necessary to continue programmatic ministry remains an open question. Multiple large choirs and Sunday School classes are clearly memories of a grander past. But excellence in music, worship, preaching, pastoral care and spiritual formation continue. New members of diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds are joining. Long-term members are making sure that significant mission and outreach is happening. The building is well used by the congregation and a weekday childcare center operated by the YMCA. Bishop Sprague's description of Grace as it appeared to him in 2011 was upbeat:

...a vivid, multi-colored snapshot, from this retiree, who reveres Dayton and has high hopes for this congregation, which clearly is in the process of re-inventing itself with new found vibrancy, as two-way traffic is moving back and forth across the drawbridge from this historic place to a neighborhood replete with need and ripe with potential.²⁷

A welcoming spirit lending authenticity to the Grace motto—"Grace is for everyone"—is being cultivated.

The conclusion of Grace's history, as presented in *Pilgrims of Grace*, frames the Grace story with one of the most profound teachings of its Lord: the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25. After quoting from the parable, the book concludes with this worthy benediction for Grace as it lives into its third century: "May Grace Church and its members continue to carry out the mandate of Christ, which it has endeavored to follow since 1811."²⁸ Located in a city and neighborhood that has suffered greatly the effects of racism and economic decline, the need for a faith community shaped by the mandate of

²⁷ Sprague.

²⁸ *Pilgrims of Grace, Volume II*, 95.

Jesus to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and come to the prisoner is greater than ever, as is the need for advocacy of public policies that promote the hope for peace and justice envisioned by the prophets. The Grace story, past and present, justifies the conviction that Grace is a context for ministry in which, like Abraham, one can be both blessed *and* be a blessing (Genesis 12:2).

American Criminal Justice System

The ministry focus of this Doctor of Ministry project is people directly impacted by the American criminal justice system. With well over two million adults locked up in American jails and prisons, this system holds an unfortunate world record. In 2007 a resource developed for local congregations reported, “The United States has 5% of the world’s population and 25% of its prisoners.”²⁹ It is an on-going trend. In her book about mass incarceration and its relationship to racial injustice Michelle Alexander writes:

The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran. In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States, the rate is roughly eight times that, or 750 per 100,000.³⁰

This is not because American citizens are more likely to be criminals than the citizens of other countries, nor even because this nation has more crime. Statistics about crime do not show a positive relationship between crime and incarceration rates.

A major cause of our status as the preeminent “Incarceration Nation” is the so-called “War on Drugs.” This “war” was initiated by President Richard Nixon in the

²⁹ Betsy Heavner, “Congregational Tool Box for Prison Ministry” (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 4.

³⁰ Alexander, 6.

1970s. It has been waged by every subsequent administration because of its political capital in spite of its dismal failure. According to an award-winning documentary film called “The House I Live In”:

For over 40 years, the War on Drugs has accounted for 45 million arrests, cost over \$1 trillion, has made America the world’s largest jailer and has damaged poor communities at home and abroad. Yet, drugs are cheaper, purer and more available today than ever.³¹

The only benefactors of this war have been those capitalizing on an ever-expanding prison industry. According to Bryan Stevenson in his new book *Just Mercy*, “The privatization of prison health care, prison commerce, and a range of services has made mass incarceration a money-making windfall for a few and a costly nightmare for the rest of us.”³² Stevenson should know. As a lawyer and executive director of Equal Justice Initiative, he has been involved with litigation concerning death row inmates for thirty years.

High incarceration rates of young, poor, minority citizens—those who have flooded American jails and prisons in recent history—make a mockery of the term “justice” in the name “criminal justice system.” As Alexander points out, “Sociologists have frequently observed that governments use punishment primarily as a tool of social control, and thus the extent or severity of punishment is often unrelated to actual crime patterns.”³³ “Common sense would treat substance abuse as a health issue, not a crime. Why is the use and sale of drugs such as tobacco and alcohol legal, while the use and sale

³¹ *The House I Live In*, written, directed, and produced by Eugene Jarecki, 2012, 108: Virgil Films, 2013, DVD.

³² Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 17.

³³ Alexander, 7.

of others is not? Why has the possession of one form of an illegal drug (crack cocaine) been dealt with much more harshly than the possession of that same drug in another form (powder cocaine)? These are examples from just one area of injustice in the criminal justice system.

High incarceration rates do not make American communities safer. The threat of incarceration does not effectively deter crime. Most people who “do time” return to their communities. Many returning citizens commit new crimes, inflicting further hurt on themselves and their communities. According to the Horizon Prison Initiative “upon release approximately 50% will reoffend and return to prison within three years.”³⁴ This high recidivism rate suggests that current practices are not “correcting” behavior as one might think would be the case with the new corrections language of incarceration. Incarceration normally increases obstacles to productive citizenship for returning citizens in basic ways like housing, employment, and even voting. These are coined “collateral sanctions.” The experience of incarceration rarely addresses the factors that led people there; it frequently exasperates them. People behind bars are more likely to learn how to be better criminals than how to be better citizens. In the words of Horizon staff, “Unless something is done to end this decades-old trend that weakens all facets of society, we will all continue to pay the price.”

The conceptual framework for the American criminal justice system is retributive. It is a legacy of ancient Rome with its brutal slave law. The Dutch historian of law, Herman Bianchi, has concluded that “it was precisely this retributive law that was taken

³⁴ FAQ paper, Horizon Prison Initiative, 2014.

over into highly punitive Western ways of criminal justice.”³⁵ Operating with a retributive justice paradigm, society punishes individuals who do not conform to its laws. Punishment is meant first and foremost to uphold the power of the state by discouraging law-breaking and encouraging law-abiding. It also serves to satisfy the desire for revenge by victims and their families. It masquerades as justice.

In the past punishment was achieved through banishment from the community, isolation within the community, or physical harm (e.g. whipping, mutilation, hanging). Imprisonment as punishment is a relatively recent practice, replacing previous practices of physical harm, except in the case of capital crimes. It is a punishment of isolation, captivity, and reduced rights. It is the keystone of the American criminal justice system and increasingly a millstone for healthy community. Even those at the center of the criminal justice system are recognizing its deficiencies and calling for change. Federal Judge Walter Rice, speaking from fifty years of experience in the criminal justice system, recently said, “Judges everywhere have recognized that the way our criminal system works is not very effective—we’ve got to start doing things differently.”³⁶ He said that most judges know this, but some are in communities stuck in the old “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” mentality where change is not possible.

Judge Rice advocates for communities to help people who want to help themselves. He contends that everyone deserves a second chance on the condition of having made a conscious decision to change his or her life. Judge Rice has been a leader

³⁵ Pierre Allard and Wayne Northey, “Christianity: the Rediscovery of Restorative Justice,” in *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*, ed., 127.

³⁶ Walter H. Rice is a federal judge for the U.S. District Court serving on senior status. He spoke at the *Restoration, Recovery, and Re-Entry Conference* held at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio on October 11, 2014.

in establishing “Reentry courts” in Montgomery County, Ohio. A reentry court is a specialized court for offenders who leave prison early and reenter society. Judge Rice gave three reasons to take a new approach: (1) it is the right thing to do, (2) our criminal justice budget here and everywhere “has gone through the roof,” and (3) helping people help themselves is the best public safety measure. Articulating the sense in which taking a new approach is the right thing to do, Bryan Stevenson writes:

I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment of the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.³⁷

These words echo the prophets of old and the teachings of the Nazarene, Jesus. They are not words spoken in a vacuum. There is a movement in American society toward a different approach than the retributive model of criminal justice: restorative justice.

Restorative Justice Movement

The advocacy and action of Judge Walter Rice reflects the movement that has begun in this country toward an alternative to the retributive model of criminal justice. The approach this movement advocates is called “restorative justice.” It has roots in Aboriginal traditions “that use the principles of healing and living in harmony with all beings and with nature as the basis for mending damaged personal and communal relationships.”³⁸ It is also firmly grounded in biblical tradition, proposed by Howard

³⁷ Stevenson, 18.

³⁸ Mark Umbreit and Marilyn Peterson Armour, *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2011), 67.

Zehr's seminal work, *Changing Lenses*, as a new paradigm for justice based on biblical concepts of shalom, covenant, and righteousness.

The concepts were established in the First Testament and further developed in the Second Testament for a new context. They were not lost on the early church fathers. In 412 C.E. Augustine invoked the concepts in a letter he wrote to Marcellinus, a judge appointed by Emperor Honorius. In the letter Augustine pleads with Marcellinus to refrain from maiming or executing members of the Donatist faction who had maimed, beaten and killed members of Augustine's Catholic community:

Fulfil, Christian judge, the duty of an affectionate father; let your indignation against their crimes be tempered by considerations of humanity; be not provoked by the atrocity of their sinful deeds to gratify the passion of revenge, but rather be moved by the wounds which these deeds have inflicted on their own souls to exercise a desire to heal them.³⁹

Augustine counseled against retribution. He advocated restoration. The paradigm Zehr proposes is not really new.

In *Changing Lenses*, Zehr unpacks the three basic meanings of the Hebrew word *shalom* (English peace, Greek *eirene*): physical well-being, right relationship, and integrity. Shalom is God's will for the world. According to Zehr:

Shalom defines how God intends things to be. God intends people to live in a condition of 'all rightness' in the material world; in interpersonal, social and political relationships; and in personal character.⁴⁰

³⁹ Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, LL.D. (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1886), *Vol. 1 The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin, with a Sketch of his Life and Work*, accessed February 14, 2015, http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1903#Schaff_1330-01_1563.

⁴⁰ Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 132.

Zehr then presents covenant as “the basis and primary model” of biblical shalom. In the ancient near east a covenant was a binding agreement between two parties each of which had certain rights and responsibilities. The Israelites distinguished themselves from other peoples by applying the concept of covenant to their relationship with God. They believed God had initiated a covenant with them and repeatedly acted to restore right relationship with them, even though they regularly failed to uphold their commitments. God’s salvation was delivered out of God’s love, not because it was earned or deserved.

The discussion of covenant leads Zehr to the concept of justice which he describes as “a measuring stick to test for shalom.”⁴¹ An important characteristic of biblical justice is its holistic nature. It is “right-ordering”—the work of making things right, as exemplified over and over again by God with regard to re-establishing shalom. It is making things right again, after the people have messed up.

Under the influence of Greco-Roman culture, the holistic concept of justice based on the rich concept of shalom was bifurcated into “social” or “distributive” justice and “criminal” or “retributive” justice. Zehr explains the difference: “When we talk about wrongs having to do with the distribution of wealth and power, we call these questions of social justice. When we talk about wrongs legally defined as crimes we categorize this as the realm of retributive justice.”⁴² Political expediency has led to more action with regard to retributive than distributive justice. “Get tough on crime” has been much more successful in garnering votes than “Equal pay for equal work.”

⁴¹ Zehr, 1990, 136.

⁴² Zehr, 1990, 137.

And yet, the holistic sense of justice characteristic of the biblical tradition persists in American thought and action. In the mid-19th century a Unitarian minister named Theodore Parker worked for the abolition of slavery. In a sermon entitled “Of Justice and the Conscience” he confessed:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.⁴³

A century later Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed the sentiment in his famous statement: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Zehr calls for a paradigm of justice in American civil life consistent with the biblical understanding of justice advocated by Parker and King. He called it “covenant justice” in 1990. As the conversation developed, by the turn of the millennia it had come to be called “restorative justice,” defined as “a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.”⁴⁴ Further testimony to this movement comes from Pierre Allard and Wayne Northey:

Over the last twenty-five years, there have been a number of initiatives in many countries challenging us to go beyond a retributive justice to a Restorative Justice. These initiatives have been emerging signs of hope calling for a radical reengagement of the Christian faith in criminal justice issues from a Restorative Justice perspective.⁴⁵

⁴³ Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (1857) as quoted by Garson O’Toole in “The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long But It Bends Toward Justice” (blog), accessed October 7, 2014, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe>.

⁴⁴ Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002), 37.

⁴⁵ Allard, 135.

Restorative justice is not just an American movement, nor just a Christian movement. But it is a movement that can be empowered by a Christian perspective, if that perspective is true to its biblical origins.

The United Methodist Church shares this new paradigm of justice and has joined the restorative justice movement. Its “Social Principles” include a strong endorsement of foundational understandings and principles. The statement includes a succinct description of what restorative justice is and how it differs from retributive justice. That statement is quoted in its entirety here:

In the love of Christ, who came to save those who are lost and vulnerable, we urge the creation of a genuinely new system for the care and restoration of victims, offenders, criminal justice officials, and the community as a whole. Restorative justice grows out of biblical authority, which emphasizes a right relationship with God, self, and community. When such relationships are violated or broken through crime, opportunities are created to make things right.

Most criminal justice systems around the world are retributive. These retributive justice systems profess to hold the offender accountable to the state and use punishment as the equalizing tool for accountability. In contrast, restorative justice seeks to hold the offender accountable to the victimized person, and to the disrupted community. Through God’s transforming power, restorative justice seeks to repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved, including the victim, the offender, the families, and the community. The Church is transformed when it responds to the claims of discipleship by becoming an agent of healing and systemic change.⁴⁶

As is evident from this statement, the restorative justice movement in response to crime has both secular and spiritual dimensions. At the same time, it respects the principle of separation of church and state.⁴⁷ The “Breath of Fresh Air” project positions itself in the

⁴⁶ Social Principles of the UMC, accessed 10/6/2014, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/political-community>.

⁴⁷ Specific examples are avoidance of proselytizing and voluntary programming.

context of the restorative justice movement as articulated in the United Methodist Social Principles. It seeks to address the spiritual dimensions of restorative justice. It also adapts for use a primary practice of restorative justice, the peacemaking circle.

Peacemaking circles are inspired by Native American talking circles. They structure a way for people to engage in conversation that allows each person an equal opportunity to speak without fear of interruption, and to listen without feeling pressure to respond. The form and the process involved collaborate to create a safe, non-hierarchical environment for sharing ideas, perceptions, and feelings. Most of all, participants are encouraged and enabled to tell their personal stories. The circle is an egalitarian form, with all points in the circle being in equal relation to the center. No member of the circle is more or less valued than any other member. All members of the circle have the opportunity to let their voice be heard. Expectations are clarified and agreed upon by all participants. Values of the peacemaking circle include respect, honesty, and patience.

Once a topic for conversation has been identified by the “circlekeeper,” a “talking piece” facilitates the circle process. This is an object that is passed from one person to another to indicate whose turn it is to speak. Only the person holding the talking piece speaks; all others listen. A person may choose to hold the talking piece in silence, or to pass it on to the next person without speaking. The flow of a peacemaking circle is also clearly structured with well defined opening and closing segments. These may combine a regular ritual or ceremony with more varied activities.

Circle processes have been applied to many different contexts and purposes.⁴⁸ In the late twentieth century they began to be used as an alternate way of sentencing in Canada. The practice became more widespread through the work of Kay Pranis who served as the Restorative Justice Planner for the Minnesota Department of Corrections for nine years. Pranis developed training methods and resources which spread the practice in this country. It has been used extensively with youth gang members on Chicago's south side by Fr. Dave Kelly, Executive Director of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation. Under his leadership circle training has been established in Dayton and is practiced here in a number of settings including the Montgomery County Jail.

Chillicothe Correctional Institution

The "Breath of Fresh Air" project was implemented in two detention settings. One was a state prison for men in south central Ohio just outside the county seat town of Chillicothe. Last year 20,533 convicted felons were committed to the Ohio state prison system (17,733 males; 2,800 females).⁴⁹ This system is administered by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections. The physical plant of Chillicothe Correctional Institution (CCI) was originally an army base for teaching people to drive Sherman tanks. It was opened as a prison in 1966 on a 72-acre plot. CCI has the most extensive area inside the fence of any Ohio state prison (excluding the farms). Its staff of 540 includes nearly 350 security personnel.

⁴⁸ Other uses of circle processes are listed in *The Little Book of Circle Processes* by Kay Pranis (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 17-18. More specifically, as Lisa Hess has observed, circle processes are also used by groups such as Peer-Spirit and Women Writing for Change.

⁴⁹ "Ohio Dept. of Rehabilitation and Correction: FAQs," accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.drc.ohio.gov/web/FAQ.htm>.

The current prison population of CCI is 2,750. This number includes approximately 875 minimum security inmates, 1740 medium security inmates, and 130 men on Death Row.⁵⁰ Of this population approximately one-third are African American. The majority of the remaining two-third's are Euro-American. CCI had the most inmates among Ohio prisons for many years. The introduction of Death Row has put CCI down to the 4th in total population. According to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, the daily cost per inmate is calculated to be \$45.23. The CCI website highlights three distinctive residential programs: the Inmate Reintegration Unit for those who will be released soon, the newly formed Therapeutic Community, and the Horizon Prison Initiative. "Breath of Fresh Air" was implemented in the Horizon dorm with Horizon participants.

Horizon Prison Initiative

The Horizon Prison Initiative is a year-long, faith-based rehabilitation program for incarcerated men. The mission and vision of Horizon is "to transform prisoners who transform prisons and communities."⁵¹ It grew out of the Kairos three-day spiritual retreat program for people in prison. It is multi-faith, though the majority of participants are Christian. Horizon is a voluntary program accessed through an application and interview screening process. Criteria for selection include a willingness to change, an absence of current disciplinary infractions, and at least two years of a sentence remaining.

⁵⁰ These and other statistics in this section come from "Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction: Chillicothe Correctional Institution," accessed Oct. 7, 2014, <http://www.drc.ohio.gov/Public/cci.htm>.

⁵¹ Horizon Prison Initiative FAQ, Mission, Vision, Beliefs, Values, and Goals paper, 2014.

Diversity is an important component of Horizon, which accepts participants regardless of faith tradition, age, ethnicity, or crime committed. In the context of diversity men learn to understand and articulate their own experience and faith commitments more fully, while they are learning to appreciate the life experience and faith traditions of others who differ from them. During the program participants live in family units in a dormitory separate from the general prison population. The culture of Horizon is in stark contrast to the overall prison culture as participants learn to get along with former enemies, acquire non-violent conflict management skills, share personal stories, and express emotions. Participants are enabled to address the sources of trauma that contributed to their criminal behavior.

There are Horizon programs at three Ohio institutions. The first one launched at Marion Correctional Institution in 2000; the most recent began at London in 2012. The program in Chillicothe is the largest, accommodating 81 men. Its first class entered in 2010. It is staffed with a part-time Program Coordinator who is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church with a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies. A significant number of volunteers participate as “outside brothers” who journey with a specific inmate throughout his year in Horizon. Other volunteers lead programs under the supervision of the Program Coordinator. Horizon graduates also lead programs and teach classes.

Horizon’s values and goals are consistent with many aspects of the Restorative Justice movement. The five core values of Horizon are spirituality, accountability, respect, community, and change. The four stated goals are: (1) to have participants gain a deeper understanding of their chosen faith; (2) to help participants learn to live in a functioning family; (3) to assist participants in contributing to the larger community; and

(4) to empower participants to face the reality that brought them to prison. Basic courses taken by all Horizon participants include character reformation, trauma recovery, victim awareness, anger management, and cognitive restructuring.

With a fourteen-year record to examine, it is evident that the Horizon Prison Initiative has made a positive difference in the life of individuals, correctional institutions, and communities. According to Horizon documentation, “Horizon participants are associated with significantly fewer disciplinary infractions than non-participants.”⁵² Horizon has also reduced recidivism rates. Program officials estimate a recidivism rate for Horizon graduates that is five times lower than the rate for non-participants.

Montgomery County Jail

The other detention setting for the “Breath of Fresh Air” project was the Montgomery County Jail located in downtown Dayton, Ohio. Maintenance of the jail is the responsibility of the county sheriff. When Dayton was in its infancy 200 years ago, George Newcombe, the first sheriff, met his needs for retaining prisoners by lowering them into a dry well with a rope or by chaining them to a corncrib.⁵³ As Dayton grew, so did its capacity for housing prisoners. By the mid-nineteenth century the county boasted a jail with limestone walls two feet thick that incarcerated up to seventy people. This facility was replaced by a building equipped with a gallows for public hangings, the last of which occurred in 1877.

⁵² Horizon Prison Initiative 2014 brochure.

⁵³ “Montgomery County Sheriff: Jail History/General Info,” accessed Oct. 10, 2014, http://www.mcoho.org/sheriff/jail_info.cfm.

The current Montgomery County Jail is the result of renovations completed ten years ago to a facility built in 1965. It has a 914 prisoner-bed capacity. According to the Sheriff's Annual Report, the total number of prisoners booked in 2013 was 27,474 with an average length of stay of 20 days for felons and 6 days for misdemeanants. Many inmates are uneducated, unemployed, and poor, with substance abuse or mental health problems. Estimates by the jail chaplain are that on any given day approximately 800 persons are incarcerated, including 225 women. The project program was offered to women in the jail, as selected by the chaplain.

The primary goal of the Montgomery County Jail as stated in the Sheriff's Annual Report is "to provide a safe and secure environment to promote positive prisoner behavior."⁵⁴ According to its website, the jail "has attained the highest honor for observance of national correctional standards."⁵⁵ The Report's section on Inmate Programs includes a notice about the project program (at that time called "Life Lessons through the Word"): "In 2013, two new programs were added, *Life Lessons Through the Word* and *Spiritual Solutions*." The chaplain screens, coordinates, and trains program leaders and volunteer chaplains. He holds monthly training meetings in addition to a mandated PREA⁵⁶ training. His goal as a chaplain and mentor to volunteer chaplains is to bring seeds and water to the persons spending time in the Montgomery County Jail.

⁵⁴ "Montgomery County Sheriff's Office Annual Report 2013," accessed Oct. 10, 2014, <http://www.mcoho.org/sheriff/> (downloadable PDF),.

⁵⁵ "Montgomery County Sheriff: Jail History/General Info," accessed Oct. 10, 2014, http://www.mcoho.org/sheriff/jail_info.cfm.

⁵⁶ Prisoner Rape Elimination Act of 2003. The purpose of PREA training is to insure that the jail environment is safe, humane and secure, and that inmates are free from the threat of sexual misconduct.

“Seeds and water” provided on-going inspiration for this project as a companion metaphor to “Breath of Fresh Air.”

Biblical Storytelling and Biblical Storytelling Workshops

Long before we had a book called a Bible read in silence and studied objectively as a source for theological doctrines, people gathered in small groups telling their stories in relation to God. Relationship with God was personal, immediate, and grounded in family narrative that was both informative and enjoyable. This is the oral culture of Abraham and Sarah, the culture in which our faith tradition had its genesis. It is the communication culture of many in today’s prisons, where orality abounds.

When it comes to learning and telling God’s stories by heart, God laid down the law in the Law. Deuteronomy 6:4-7 became the central confession of the people of Israel. It is named after its first word in Hebrew—*Shema*—which means “hear.” In the Shema it is made clear that God calls us to intimate, covenantal relationship by having God’s words in our hearts and reciting them to others. Sacred story is at the heart of faith formation.

Why is it important for us to know God’s stories intimately? Story is a primary way we make sense of our lives and form meaningful relationships with each other in families and communities, and with God. Those who are incarcerated have broken relationships. Story can help mend them. This has been validated by the peacemaking circles of Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR). PBMR works with members of youth gangs in Chicago’s South Side. The human spirit is formed by weaving one’s own unfolding story into the stories of God and God’s people.

Undernourished or damaged spirits, so prevalent in jails and prisons, can be healed and nourished through connection with sacred story.

A primary way of showing our love for God is to commit our time, energy and intellectual ability in learning God's stories by heart. This is not mere memorization. Memorization is an activity limited to the head. It is disconnected, surface knowledge of the story. It is only a first step on the way to the goal. The goal of biblical storytelling is internalization, not memorization. Internalization is when the story becomes part of your story so that you tell it just like you would tell the story of your childhood or any familiar incident in your life. This kind of knowing the story takes time and patience. It is getting the stories of God into long-term memory.

How does this happen? What is the way to deep internalization of God's stories? Many persons think that they are not capable of learning stories by heart. But all humans, young and old, literate and illiterate, outsiders and insiders, have great capacity for storing and accessing biblical stories in their long-term memory. Understanding how the memory works increases confidence that learning biblical stories by heart can actually happen. It supports the design of effective practices for learning biblical stories.⁵⁷

Biblical storytelling workshops introduce biblical storytelling processes and teach specific stories. A standard workshop has a four-stage form: learn the story, explore how the story was heard in its original context, connect with the story, tell the story. A guiding principle for designing these workshops is to balance activities that make use of the seven

⁵⁷ Roberta Klatzky, in her book *Human Memory* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman, 1980), has clarified much about the structure of human memory.

basic human “intelligences.”⁵⁸ Methods include rhythmic, chant, or singing activities—all of which use musical intelligence. Drawing storyboards, creating play dough expressions, and manipulating wooden figures exercise spatial intelligence. Mathematical intelligence is used when pictures depicting episodes of the story are placed in correct sequence, when numbers mentioned in the story are recalled, or when logical reasoning within the story is noticed. Interpersonal intelligence is necessary for coordinating group tellings or explicating the dynamics of relationship in a story. Intrapersonal intelligence is used in making connections between the story and one’s personal experience.

Teaching biblical stories using oral methods has the side benefit of assisting adults with the task of reading. Incarcerated persons are typically more skilled at oral communication than literate. Low literacy rates are the norm in a prison population. Oral learning methods include the most ancient form of education, sometimes called “chirping” and more descriptively called “repeat-after-me.” Gestures and movements are repeated, as well as words, so that kinesthetic intelligence is brought into play along with verbal intelligence.

The story of Jesus and the children has been a source of inspiration and guidance in my leading such workshops over the years. I often refer to what I hope will happen as enjoying the story together. The purpose of the workshop time is not to learn something in the head that can then be recited as “proof” of some religious doctrine or other, or to be more biblically literate. The purpose is to establish connection to the characters of God’s

⁵⁸ Multiple intelligence theory informed development of “Circle of the Word” process and activities. The theory was introduced by Howard Gardner in 1983 in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004). A more popular and pragmatic work was contributed by Thomas Armstrong in *Seven Kinds of Smarts: Identifying and Developing Your Multiple Intelligences*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Plume, 1993).

story, especially to Jesus, and thus to God. The purpose is ultimately to receive the kingdom of God “as a little child” (Mark 10:15).

Taking Jesus at his word that we are to receive the kingdom of God as a little child, we trust the stories. Trust comes hard for people in prison. If we can help them believe that they can trust God’s stories as sources of hope and new life, ministry will have happened. To receive the kingdom of God as a little child we approach God’s stories fresh and with wonder. And we play with them creatively, using whatever means of learning to which we are most suited, trying out others gingerly that may seem more challenging.

Synergy

Mass incarceration in the United States raises significant issues and manifold needs. There is the need for political action to change laws with unjust and discriminatory sentencing and overly punitive measures for non-violent crimes. There is the need to curtail the privatization of prisons, where communities and companies profit by keeping people incarcerated. There is the need to transform public opinion about the purpose of imprisonment from punishment to whatever degree of reconciliation is possible. There is the need to address illiteracy, housing, family relations, substance abuse, emotional trauma, employment, domestic violence and poverty.

Mass incarceration is a new form of disenfranchisement of African Americans—a new way in which racism has impacted public policy—as detailed in Michelle Alexander’s recent book, *The New Jim Crow*. The so-called “War on Drugs” with harsh and unequal sentences related to race, the privatization of the prison system, and location

of prisons in rural white communities indicate the degree to which our criminal justice system ironically serves as a vehicle for oppressive social injustice that dates back to slavery. Factoring in racial, economic, and educational inequities which drive the pipeline to prison for so many African American children, it is obvious that involvement with people caught up in the criminal justice system means involvement with issues of racial justice.

Issues and needs are obvious at the grass roots as well. A woman in the Grace Church neighborhood shared her concern for children who have nowhere to go when both parents are incarcerated. They are put in foster care, which may or may not provide good care. She told me that without her intervention this would have happened to her granddaughter. She envisioned a group home to care for these children. There are many such children in the area around Grace. The neighborhood coordinator at the local public school knows from daily contact with students that “lots of them” have parents in jail or prison, now or in the past. Her estimate was one in four. The fact that several of the small group of children attending our church in recent years had parents in prison is a reflection of the difficult reality for many children in predominantly poor neighborhoods like the one surrounding Grace.

Whether national or local, these issues seem so big and the needs so pervasive that I have felt overwhelmed—with inadequate experience or education—at the prospect of even beginning to address them. I am not trained in social work, politics, or law. What gifts do I bring in answer to this calling? Federal Judge Walter Rice emphasized that those who successfully re-entered the community following incarceration were those who were spiritually grounded. Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children’s Zone,

specified the essential role of faith and hope in helping children raised in urban poverty beat the odds they face.

A poignant description of what happens to the spirit behind bars came from an inmate who participated in the project. He said, “When incarcerated you are like a fatherless child looking for hope.”⁵⁹ There is a need to develop practices that provide prisoners with the spiritual grounding to find light in their darkness and hope for their future. They need a breath of fresh air that will fill them with the Spirit of Life. This is the need I was called to address. How can spiritual formation be facilitated for people in jail or prison?

Not all approaches are helpful. A context associate who regularly works with women in jail reports the importance of the Bible to many women there, while also reporting the way in which religion and the Bible as experienced by these women too frequently works against their spiritual health. Many of these women have been abused by men. The patriarchal bent of some approaches to Christianity and biblical literature can be counterproductive to healthy spiritual development. Chaplain Willie Templeton of the Montgomery County Jail described some approaches as a hindrance rather than a help saying, “A lot of times the leaders of a Bible study and/or worship service can come off as self righteous or judgmental...and beat them over the head about their decision-making.”⁶⁰ A new approach to engaging the Scriptures is a need for both women and men living behind bars.

⁵⁹ Response to interview question about the impact of the ministry model on people who are incarcerated by an incarcerated male participant May 13, 2014.

⁶⁰ Interview with Chaplain Willie Templeton, June 18, 2014, Montgomery County Jail, Dayton, Ohio.

All humans are in need of healing and liberation, supportive community, repentance, forgiveness, empowerment and hope. People in detention settings have the time and in some cases the will to pursue fulfillment of these needs. “You don’t have to tell an inmate that they’re wrong. They know they’re wrong—they’re in jail...Some folks come in and they’re just ready to change.”⁶¹ The faith premise of this project is that the Word of God may come like a breath of fresh air to fill spiritual needs of people in detention through interactive engagement with biblical stories in a safe, small group context. Biblical storytelling enables “the Voice that began creation”⁶² to give a voice to the voiceless.⁶³ Internalizing biblical scriptures to tell oneself and others connects people to God and to each other in a positive way. Biblical storytelling workshops facilitate the internalization of biblical stories in supportive community.

Since my vocation as an ordained Deacon is to connect the church with the community through Word and service, a significant component of the project was to develop an opportunity for local church members to become involved in ministry with the incarcerated. After studying Grace Church as a context for ministry, I concluded that Grace needs congregational connection with people in jail or prison. Ministry with incarcerated persons is named as a central component of discipleship by Jesus, mandated by our denomination’s founder John Wesley, identified as a guide for future ministry by Grace’s historical record, and strongly affirmed by its current leadership. Furthermore, 83% of surveyed members felt that “church congregations should be involved with

⁶¹ Interview, June 18, 2014.

⁶² Line from a prayer song used to center before telling a sacred story.

⁶³ Gregory C. Ellison II describes the lack of voice prevalent among those who do time in *Cut Dead But Sill Alive* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013).

incarcerated persons.” Yet despite all this, the Grace congregation has not been involved in detention ministry. This suggests not just a need, but a felt need to fulfill the last criteria for discipleship that Jesus gives in his parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 24:34-36):

Then the king will say to those at his right hand,
 ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father,
 inherit the kingdom prepared for you
 from the foundation of the world.
 For I was hungry and you gave me food,
 I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
 I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
 I was naked and you gave me clothing,
 I was sick and you took care of me,
 I was in prison and you visited me.’

Jesus’ parable of the last judgment concludes the written history of Grace Church and inspires its future.⁶⁴ To address the need of Grace Church to be in ministry with incarcerated persons, an aspect of this project will be to develop a small group dedicated to this work. They can learn how to lead various aspects of the workshop and be outside partners as full participants in learning the story with prisoners.

I have proven ability to lead biblical storytelling workshops.⁶⁵ These workshops help participants internalize a particular biblical story. They can be an occasion for healing and spiritual growth. From my experience with biblical storytelling over the past twenty-five years in many different contexts all over the world with a great variety of people, I had a hunch that a biblical storytelling approach, coupled with peacemaking circle processes, could provide a rich seedbed for spiritual empowerment of incarcerated

⁶⁴ *Pilgrims of Grace, Volume II*, 95.

⁶⁵ I base this assessment on the many favorable evaluations from participants in workshops I have led over the last twenty years.

persons. I was interested to learn how such an approach would actually be experienced by all parties involved. The synergy between my personal story, the story of Grace Church, and the experience of people directly impacted by the criminal justice system coalesced in a decision to conduct an action research project with incarcerated men and women that involves hearing, learning, telling, and creatively engaging stories from the biblical tradition as a means of spiritual empowerment. This is the primary focus of the “Breath of Fresh Air” action research project.

The project investigated the viability and value of internalizing biblical stories as a resource for spiritual formation of persons who are incarcerated through an interactive small group program called “Circle of the Word.” The project entailed development of the program, implementation and evaluation. It explored the integration of peacemaking circle processes with biblical storytelling workshop processes. It pursued involvement of local church members. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine the efficacy of a biblical storytelling approach to spiritual growth for men in the Horizon Prison Initiative at Chillicothe Correctional Institution and women in the Montgomery, Ohio County Jail. The primary research question of the project was: can the internalization of story of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection through a Circle of the Word program empower hopeful thinking for incarcerated persons? The next chapter will articulate the biblical foundations of the “Breath of Fresh Air” project.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Biblical foundations from the Old Testament for the project “Breath of Fresh Air: Spiritual Empowerment through Biblical Storytelling with Incarcerated Men and Women” come from the story of Ezekiel prophesying in the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) which is here entitled “Dry Bones.” Biblical foundations from the New Testament come from the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples in a locked room (John 20:19-23) which will be called “Behind Locked Doors.” Both *ruach* (Hebrew) and *pneuma* (Greek) have a similar range of meanings: wind, spirit, and breath. These terms figure prominently in the two stories, making them good candidates as foundations for the ministry model.

Dry Bones and Behind Locked Doors reflect both experiences and needs of people who are incarcerated: the experience of grievous loss, the quest for hope, and the promise of spiritual empowerment. A personal story from a county jail chaplain echoes these dynamics. Willie Templeton, Jr., chaplain of the Montgomery County (Ohio) Jail, shared the following experience in a 2014 Volunteer Chaplain training meeting:

The young lady was convicted of killing her grandmother. She asked me if her life was over. I shared with her that although she had to give an account of her actions by going to prison, her life was not over. I explained to her that there was a lot of things she could do while in prison to help other young women who had addiction issues. She could get her education. She could take part in programs. Most of all she could give her

life to Christ, and allow Him to shine through her as a shining example of what God can do—no matter her situation. As I think back on that day, she was hurting because she was high on drugs when she did this. Now she was sober and trying to make sense out of all that had happened.

Life as she knew it was gone forever. Could there be a breath of fresh air in this situation? How this had happened and whether or not there was any source of hope for the future were questions addressed by Ezekiel and John.

Under King David the Israeli tribal confederacy united to become a nation state. Soon after David's son Solomon died (922 BCE) the nation divided into northern and southern kingdoms: Israel and Judah. Two hundred years later the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. Then in 587 BCE General Nebuzaradan, commander of Nebuchadnezzar's army, delivered the deathblow to national identity when he torched Jerusalem and the Temple, and appropriated the southern kingdom for the Babylonian empire. When the smoke cleared, in the words of John Bright, "the land had been completely wrecked, its cities destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported."¹ The prophet Ezekiel was among those deported.

Just as Templeton was called to minister to an anxious young woman asking "Is my life over?" when she faced prison, so also Ezekiel was called to speak prophetic words to his exiled people when they tried to make sense out of what had happened to them. The book of Ezekiel records the visions and words that explain how their present predicament is an accounting for breaking God's Law. Ezekiel's visions and words promise new life. In the valley of dry bones, God asks Ezekiel the question on the minds of the people, "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:3a). Obeying God's command,

¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 331.

Ezekiel exhorts the people to trust the presence and power of God, whatever their circumstance.

The early church will express this same sentiment, as did Templeton: “Most of all she could give her life to Christ, and allow Him to shine through her as a shining example of what God can do—no matter her situation.” This is the conviction conveyed by the evangelist John in the story of Jesus’ appearance to his disciples, gathered behind locked doors in fear and defeat following the brutal execution of their leader. Suddenly Jesus appears in their midst. He greets them with peace, shows them evidence that it is really him, and breathes on them so that they might receive God’s spirit. He commissions and empowers them for new purpose and new life, offering a reliable source of hope.

Jesus’ words speak not only to the disciples of his day, but also to those on the other side of the Jewish War in the wake of which John wrote his Gospel. Once again the holy city of the Judeans had been decimated. Once again the Temple destroyed, the walls leveled, the people killed, enslaved, and deported—their way of life gone forever. A breath of fresh air was needed in 587 BCE, in 33 CE at the time of Jesus’ death, and again at the end of the first century in the aftermath of the War. It is needed today in American jails and prisons. The ministry model of this project may be the occasion for such a breath.

Discussion of the stories recorded in Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 20:19-23 will use exegetical methods from the emerging approach to biblical hermeneutics called “performance criticism.” Based as it is on the oral communication of biblical tradition, “breath of fresh air” is an appropriate metaphor for performance criticism. In order to perform a story, one must breathe. This chapter will present a brief discussion of

performance criticism—what it is and why it is important—followed by a description of methodological components. The components will then be employed in an analysis of the two foundational stories. Along with explicating biblical foundations, this performance criticism paradigm of biblical hermeneutic is a central component of the “Breath of Fresh Air” ministry model.

Biblical Performance Criticism

Fifteen years before Howard Zehr called for a paradigm shift with regard to crime and justice, Walter Wink perceived a similar need in the realm of biblical study.² He published a manifesto that began with the provocative statement, “Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt.”³ Expanding on the business metaphor he explained that bankruptcy does not mean that the traditional method of biblical study developed in modernity is without value, but that, as Wink said, “it is no longer able to accomplish its avowed purpose for existence.”⁴ The “Breath of Fresh Air” project shares what Wink articulated as the purpose for biblical study: “to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.”⁵ Wink’s critique of the historical critical method as having “reduced the Bible to a dead

² For a discussion of Howard Zehr’s work, see the section on Restorative Justice in Chapter One.

³ Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973), 1.

⁴ Wink, 1.

⁵ Wink, 2.

letter”⁶ echoes Martin Luther and is shared by many today who desire on-going relevance of the biblical tradition.

Wink places responsibility for the bankruptcy of historical biblical criticism on “objectivism.”⁷ Objectivism is the attempt to study the Bible as an unbiased observer, free from any influence of emotion, ego involvement, or constraining context. It is an attempt doomed to failure, but which can create a “false consciousness” that distorts reality by refusing to admit essential aspects of reality (such as emotion, vested interests, and social location). Objectivism plays out in many ways; for example, in ignoring the impact of gender, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation on biblical interpretation. But first and foremost, it leads the interpreter to approach the Bible with “detached neutrality in matters of faith,” which cuts against its original reason for being and trivializes the hermeneutical enterprise. Wink calls it an “inadequate method” that is “incommensurate with the intention of the texts.”

The heart of Wink’s critique is the lack of what he calls, “participational involvement in the ‘object’ of research” with the result that “‘truth’ is reduced to facticity.”⁸ These shortcomings are avoided by a primary characteristic of biblical performance criticism: the practice of storytelling as a beginning, a means, and an end of research. In contrast to the source of meaning to a critical reader, in storytelling “the

⁶ Wink, 4.

⁷ “Objectivism” is not to be confused with “objectivity” which Wink strongly endorses. Biblical study without any degree of objectivity, with its frequent partner anti-intellectualism, creates another set of distortions. But these are not typical of biblical engagement in the academic world which has so influenced mainstream Christianity.

⁸ Wink, 2.

meaning is only minimally connected with ideas or facts.”⁹ The meaning of a storytelling event is connected with experience.

Wink identifies two further signs of dysfunction stemming from objectivism which contribute to the need for a new paradigm of biblical study. First, there is its “uncontrolled technologism.”¹⁰ By this he means limiting study to those questions that can be addressed and measured by the techniques of high literate methodology. This is the issue Werner Kelber addresses in an interview for a documentary on biblical performance criticism:

As far as the minute understanding of biblical texts and excessive detail is concerned: that is a preoccupation once again of a type of scholarship which is totally literary, which operates with print documents and has lost touch with the oral dimension of our biblical manuscripts.¹¹

To be fair, the scholars of which Kelber speaks probably were not in touch with the oral dimension of the manuscripts. The oral dimension is part of the new paradigm. Finally, there is the separation of research from “vital community.” As Wink explains:

Historical criticism sought to free itself from the community in order to pursue its work untrammelled by censorship and interference. With that hard-won freedom it also won isolation from any conceivable significance.¹²

Wink rests his case for the bankruptcy of traditional biblical criticism with the assertion that it developed and had purpose in an historical context which is no more. His

⁹ Thomas E. Boomershine, *The Messiah of Peace: A Performance Criticism Commentary on Mark's Passion-Resurrection Narrative*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming).

¹⁰ Wink, 15.

¹¹ *Orality, Print Culture and Biblical Interpretation*, written, directed, filmed, and produced by Eugene Botha, 2013, MP4 video, 52:51, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/index.php/component/content/article/47-performance-video/236-orality-print-culture-and-biblical-interpretation-video>.

¹² Wink, 10-11.

conclusion for current times is dire: “In the present context it is, as now practiced, obsolete.”¹³ Wink did not advance a new paradigm. Insofar as he pointed in that direction—“. . . Toward a New Paradigm . . .”—he proposed a combination of Socratic question-and-answer method with Jungian depth psychology, as practiced by a colleague for many years. He advocated communal exegesis led by a biblical interpreter who could facilitate transformative interaction with the Bible.

Sharon Ringe and Tom Boomershine,¹⁴ both students of Wink, took his call for a new paradigm of biblical study seriously. In different ways they explored what it might be to interpret the Scriptures in such a way that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation. Ringe’s “roadmap” for biblical interpretation, co-authored with Fred Tiffany, emphasizes the reality of subjectivity and the importance of naming context with regard to the researcher and the scriptures. Ringe and Tiffany are forthright in approaching study from a faith perspective and highlight the role of the faith community in research. The process of biblical study outlined in *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* includes techniques of objective inquiry as a means, not an end: “The purpose is not simply to multiply information . . . The goal is rather that each participant’s world be transformed through the encounter with the worlds of other interpreters, as they come into dialogue with the biblical text.”¹⁵ The call to help

¹³ Wink, 11.

¹⁴ As noted in the Acknowledgements at the beginning of this document, Tom Boomershine is both the mentor and the spouse of the researcher. This perspective on his work is therefore biased. Nonetheless, his role in the development of performance criticism and biblical storytelling is foundational from even the most objective vantage point.

¹⁵ Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Roadmap* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 46-47.

people engage with the Bible in order to make a concrete, positive difference in their lives sounds again.

Through his study of theatrical performance, experience of African American preaching, experimentation with biblical storytelling, and attention to new insights of communication theory and orality studies, Boomershine pushed the paradigm shift much further. Strongly influenced by the work of the Jesuit scholar, Walter Ong, Boomershine recognized the significance of major changes in modes of communication for studying and interpreting the Bible. He clarified that the heart of the need for a new paradigm of biblical study is the recognition that the Bible is not, as assumed by practitioners of the historical critical method, a static written document meant to be read in silence by individual readers, but rather a collection of recordings of dynamic oral presentations and scripts meant to aid the memory of oral performers addressing communal audiences. Dennis Dewey, reflecting on his vocation as a biblical storyteller, provides a helpful metaphor: “The written/printed text, as we have it in the Bible is a transcript of a performance, the fossil record of a lively storytelling tradition.”¹⁶ Even when the tradition does point to an original document, as with the letters of Paul, the delivery of these letters—their publication—was oral and lively.

The radical implication for biblical scholarship is the need for the interpreter to internalize the composition¹⁷ himself or herself and to experience it with an audience.

¹⁶ Dennis Dewey, “Performing the Living Word” in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 148.

¹⁷ Rather than using a metaphor reflecting manuscript or print culture, what previously was referred to as “scripture” or “text” will now be designated by composition (from the world of music); composer will be used instead of author, and audience will replace reader. In addition there is the storyteller or performer who delivers the composition in the first place.

That is, in this paradigm the composition is learned “by heart” in accordance with what we know about how it might have been heard, understood, and experienced in its original context. This is achieved, insofar as it can be achieved, by taking advantage of knowledge coming from a variety of academic disciplines, by the process of internalizing itself, by telling it to an audience, and by engaging that audience in responding to the telling. Boomershine promoted the practice of communal learning by developing a workshop approach to biblical engagement in which participants hear the story told, learn about how it was understood in its original context, explore its connections for their lives, and experience telling it to another person. These workshops combine many of the components found wanting by Wink in historical biblical study.

Boomershine co-founded the Network of Biblical Storytellers (NBS) with Adam Gilbert Bartholomew as a grass roots faith community to promote and practice the art of biblical storytelling. At the academic level, Boomershine started a section in the Society of Biblical Literature called “The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media” (fondly nicknamed “BAAM”). In the late 1980s he wrote *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* to introduce the new paradigm to popular audiences through discussion of its basic premises and processes. He applied the paradigm to ten Gospel stories. His promise that biblical storytelling will be a source of renewal and new life reinvests biblical study with the purpose for which it legitimately exists. Many have born witness to the fulfillment of this promise.

In the thirty years since *Story Journey* was published, the movement toward a new paradigm of biblical study has grown in scale, energy, and influence. For the past ten years “scholarly storytellers and storytelling scholars” have studied scripture together at

the annual NBS Seminar under the leadership of Phil Ruge-Jones. The work which BAAM initiated has generated over twenty groups in the Society of Biblical Literature. David Rhoads, a driving force in developing and promoting the new paradigm, named it “Biblical Performance Criticism.” Rhoads is editor of an academic book series devoted to this emerging discipline. The series was initiated with the 2009 publication of *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, edited by Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones. The paradigm shift is revealed in Rhoads’ answer to the question “What Is Performance Criticism?”

Biblical performance is not one more methodology added on to other methodologies. Rather, it is a paradigm shift from print medium to oral medium that has implications for the entire enterprise of New Testament studies.¹⁸

Rhoads focuses on the study and interpretation of the Second Testament, but his work has clear implications for First Testament studies as well.

On the surface, the shift seems simple enough: to understand the original character of what we call the Bible as an oral/aural event involving a performer and an audience in the context of a communication culture that pre-dates print technology (oral, manuscript or an oral-manuscript mix). But biblical scholarship has been wedded to print culture for five centuries. Its practitioners wear high-literate lenses.¹⁹ The language of biblical study is the language of fixed marks on a surface: scripture, text, book, author,

¹⁸ David Rhoads, “What is Performance Criticism?” in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance*, edited by Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 88. Rhoads focuses on the Second Testament; the paradigm shift is equally relevant for First Testament work as evidenced by scholars such as David Carr, Marti Steussy and Norman Gottwald.

¹⁹ The fact that human culture has experienced another communication revolution and is now dominated by digital systems in some ways complicates the process, but in others has brought the problem into focus since digital communication has more in common with oral communication and is, as Walter Ong explained, a kind of “secondary orality.”

reader. So the shift is not so simple after all. It involves conceiving the Bible as a collection of compositions, like musical scores. It means understanding that these compositions point to original events, not to an original document. These events were dynamic, flexible, vital, participatory, engaging, transforming, empowering, emotional, communal, and temporal experiences. The shift is from dead letters to experiential knowledge.

A primary consequence in the paradigm shift is awareness of the importance of sound. According to Boomershine:

The implication of the emerging picture of the communication culture of the ancient world is that the accurate exegesis of the meaning of these compositions in their original context requires a methodology that is congruent with the character of the manuscripts as a medium for the recording of sounds in performance.²⁰

This means paying attention to the dynamics of vocal quality and inflection including volume, pitch, pace, pronunciation, and pauses.²¹ In his forthcoming commentary on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus according to the Gospel of Mark, Boomershine draws on the extensive work of Margaret Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott:

Their study of the grammarians and rhetoricians of ancient Greek consistently describe the “colon” and the “period” as the basic units of sound in Greek oratory, drama, and poetry. The colon and the period were breath units, the colon being the words that can comfortably be said in one breath and the period as a combination of cola that build to a climax.²²

²⁰ Boomershine, *The Messiah of Peace*, Introduction.

²¹ David Rhoads, “Performance Events in Early Christianity: New Testament Writings in an Oral Context” in *The Interface of Orality and Writing: Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres* edited by Annette Weissenrieder and Robert B. Coote (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 171.

²² Boomershine, *The Messiah of Peace*, Introduction.

Once again there is a reminder of the preeminence of breath in communication of the faith tradition.

It is not only sounds that must be taken into consideration in biblical performance criticism, it is also physicality and presence. The story is embodied by a living person who gestures, uses facial expressions, and moves. As Whitney Shiner has made clear, in the cultures of the Ancient Near East words and gesture were not “divorced from each other” as they are in the print-oriented cultures of modernity.²³ Plato observed, “Some of us make gestures that are invariably in harmony with our words, but some of us fail.”²⁴ Gestures were taken seriously as an integral component of effective oral communication.

The analysis of gesture and movement for performing scriptures is an important part of biblical performance criticism. The study of ancient rhetorical gestures informs decisions about gestures in biblical speeches. For example, exaggerated gestures developed both to demonstrate skill in communication and to deal with the pragmatic problem of being heard when addressing a large and sometimes noisy crowd. The exaggerated gesture style that developed may well have transferred to performance of speeches before small groups as well.²⁵

Besides rhetorical gestures, the other main type of gesture and movement used in the ancient world was imitative—the kind of gestures and movements employed by actors to imitate the action and voice of characters in their story. Storytelling combined both the rhetorical type (especially for speeches) and the imitative type (for action).

²³ Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 127.

²⁴ Shiner, quoting Plato, 127.

²⁵ Shiner, 128.

Probably a continuum existed between those who favored rhetorical gesturing and those who favored acting. According to Shiner, “Storytelling, or the performance of narrative, falls somewhere between these two styles, more imitative than orators but with more restrained action than the comic stage or the dance.”²⁶ Awareness of this range of performance style informs contemporary interpretation.

Rhoads defines performance broadly as “any oral telling/retelling of a brief or lengthy tradition—from saying to gospel—in a formal or informal context of a gathered community by trained or untrained performers—on the assumption that every telling was a lively recounting of that tradition.”²⁷ The task of understanding, interpreting and preserving the original meaning of written compositions is hard enough. Performance involves complex factors of sound and physical presence. When all we have left is a handful of scripts it seems impossible to understand, interpret, and preserve the original meaning of a performance. Why even try, one might wonder. A voice issues an ancient challenge: “Mortal, can these bones live?” (Ezek. 37:3).

Rhoads calls the community of biblical scholarship to rise to the occasion and accept the challenge. It is a call for scholars and practitioners from diverse fields, drawing on approaches to biblical study that are traditional, as well as those more recently developed.²⁸ His comprehensive explication of biblical performance criticism, published

²⁶ Shiner, 135.

²⁷ David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I” in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (August 2006): 19, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/index.php/2011-08-26-20-28-44/articles-mainmenu-37/articles/3-performance-criticism-an-emerging-discipline-part-i/file>.

²⁸ David Rhoads describes the possible contributions through each of the following list of methodological approaches: historical, form, genre, narrative, reader-response, rhetorical, textual, orality,

in the *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (Volume 36) and available online, describes the nature of the challenge, lists the many and varied resources prepared to address it, and identifies enough investigative questions to keep the community working for many years.

The work has begun in earnest. While at an early stage, it is bearing fruit in a wide range of academic articles, books, teaching, and digital works reflecting the wide-ranging topics involved. The writing, telling, and digital production generated so far under the umbrella of biblical performance criticism is solid groundwork for biblical interpretation in digital culture.²⁹ The student who wishes to engage biblical performance criticism in the service of interpreting specific compositions can draw on this body of work for support and guidance.

It is also the case that at this early stage of the paradigm shift in biblical hermeneutics there are few examples of performance critical commentary of specific stories and no “how to” textbooks. Most interpreters are still wearing the old lenses of the dominant paradigm, even when they are aware of the emerging one.³⁰ This chapter will attempt to lay out specifics about application of performance criticism. The number of variables involved are daunting, and the limitations of describing a live performance with print or even digital technology are significant. Nevertheless, one can prophecy to the bones as commanded and then listen for the rattling to begin.

social-science, linguistic, and ideological criticism; speech act theory; translation, theater, and oral interpretation studies. See Part II of his essay in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36.

²⁹ Wipf & Stock publishers has a growing series devoted to performance criticism. In its first five years this “Biblical Performance Criticism” series has grown to ten books, with more on the way. David Rhoads has been the series editor, now joined by Holly Hearon and Kelly Iverson.

³⁰ After years of practicing and teaching biblical storytelling, and being literally married to the new paradigm, this researcher was still largely thinking through old paradigm lenses until, through research for this paper, while reading David Rhoads, the lightbulb went on and ... “Aha!”

Applying the Paradigm: Experiential Exegesis

This section of the biblical foundations chapter will discuss approaches to applying the new paradigm of biblical performance criticism to the work of experiential exegesis. “Experiential exegesis” is the effort to explicate the original meaning of a specific segment of the biblical tradition as groundwork for a faithful telling.³¹ The effort is at the same time objective and subjective. The value of exegesis is its respect for tradition by letting it speak for itself, and listening to what it has to say as objectively as possible in its original context, while being fully aware that pure objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. The value of experiential is its respect for tradition by participating in it, being impacted by it, and expecting that others will as well.

Furthermore, experiential exegesis names the kind of meaning that is the ultimate goal of biblical explication for this project: experiential. This is in contrast to the kind of meaning that developed in the communication culture of silent print following the invention of the printing press. Hans Frei called it “meaning as reference” which includes “ostensive reference” (the Bible as a source of historical information) and “ideal reference” (the Bible as a source of theological ideas).³²

In other words, in the culture of silent print what made the Bible meaningful was its function as a reference book for historical and theological knowledge. It was valued as a sourcebook of “true” facts about history and “true” ideas about God. This is in contrast to what was meaningful in the oral culture of antiquity. There, as Rhoads explains:

³¹ Boomershine first used this term in his courses on “Christianity & Communications in Contemporary Culture” at United Theological Seminary, 2004-2006.

³² Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 86-104.

Meaning is in the whole event at the site of performance—sounds, sights, storytelling/speech, audience reaction, shared cultural beliefs and values, social location, and historical circumstances.³³

In digital culture referential meaning is important, but has lost determinative power. For most people today, significant meaning “is only minimally connected with ideas or facts.”³⁴ Authentic experience that evokes emotion, inspires action, motivates change, and produces hope carries the power in today’s world.

The experiential exegesis used in this project is organized around four basic elements. First, there is the event itself, unique in every instance. In Christian practice this event would be called a “reading” consistent with the old literate paradigm. The current trend in performance criticism is to call it a “performance” or a “composition-in-performance.”³⁵ This ministry model opts for the language of storytelling and will refer to the event as a **telling**. In this project descriptions of the telling refer to contemporary events, whereas the other elements explore matters related to the original context.

Second, **story** will be used to designate the object of study. The story is that which is communicated from the faith tradition, referred to above as “a specific segment of the biblical tradition.” In the documentary paradigm this is called the “text” or “pericope.” Both of these words are too wedded to literacy for use in performance criticism. Other options that have surfaced in the previous discussion of performance criticism are “tradition” and “composition.” Each of these convey relevant aspects of

³³ Rhoads, “Performance Criticism Part I,” 126.

³⁴ Boomershine, *The Messiah of Peace*, Introduction.

³⁵ Rhoads, “Performance Criticism—Part I,” 127

meaning, but at the same time are too multivalent. This project opts for the simplicity of “story” with its grounding in oral practice.³⁶

Third, there is the **storyteller** (as opposed to “author”) who embodies the story. The storyteller literally gives the story breath so that it can stand on its feet and live. Storyteller refers both to those who told the story long ago and to those who tell it today. This project uses storyteller rather than performer because storyteller connotes more personal interaction with the story and with the audience.

Audience (vs. “reader”) is the fourth basic element. Audience refers to those who listen to the storyteller tell the story. Audience is implicitly, though not necessarily, plural. This is in keeping with the original character of the faith experience. The audience is not assumed to be passively receptive, nor silent in their listening. They may laugh or grumble, they may express through verbal or non-verbal communication their pleasure, displeasure, engagement, or disengagement with the story. The contemporary audience may be given a way to participate in the storytelling event in some intentional manner—like a sung or spoken phrase, a movement, or a gesture. With an effective telling audience members will make connections with the story. They will identify with characters, experience associations with various aspects of the story, and be impacted by its dynamics.

Experiential exegesis is an attempt to listen to the story in its original context—that is, to understand how it was heard and experienced by its first audiences. It also

³⁶ Typically story refers to a narrative with a setting, characters and plot sequence. Biblical tradition includes laws, poetry, prophecies and letters. However even these can be understood as story, or at least as residing within a story. The project will focus on narrative aspects of the biblical tradition where “story” fits most comfortably.

considers the range of connections and responses of current audiences. For purposes of the “Breath of Fresh Air” project there are two goals of the analysis. The first is to re-create a meaningful resemblance of the original performance experience for a contemporary audience. The second is to facilitate a small group engagement with the story for the sake of spiritual empowerment.

Aspects of this approach use standard exegetical methods drawing on the expertise of scholars as conveyed in biblical commentaries and reference tools. However, these methods will be used in service of a performance critical study of the story grounded in its internalization and performance. That is, data will be garnered through examination of the process of learning the story by heart and telling it to an audience. Information and insights from those working in fields relevant to biblical performance criticism also contribute to the analysis.

The dynamic relationship between the four basic elements of this application of experiential exegesis—telling, story, storyteller, and audience—is apparent even in the process of naming them. They impact one another. To talk about one is to talk about the others. Nevertheless, different questions can be asked of each. This application will be organized around questions for each of the four elements. The following list of questions is not all-inclusive, but establishes the scope for the “Breath of Fresh Air” project.

Telling

1. In what **space** will the telling occur? The physical venue for the telling makes a difference. Factors to consider are size, seating configuration, the presence or absence

of a raised stage, acoustics/amplification, and the type of space (for example: park, tent, church, nursing home, jail).

2. What is the **occasion** for the telling? Occasion, like space, influences interpretive decisions with regard to language, voice, movement and interaction with the audience.
3. Who is the **contemporary audience**? Do a majority of those in the audience share any common characteristics?

Story

1. What is the **narrative context** of the story? What larger story is it a part of? What immediately precedes it?
2. What **words** will be used to convey the story? Our modern standard translations were developed under the old paradigm, assuming that the recipients were silent readers. Examples include: (a) changing a word to its synonym to avoid repetition and thereby losing the storytelling benefits associated with verbal threads; (b) changing verbs in historical present tense to past tense and thereby losing the sense of immediacy created by the historical present tense;³⁷ (c) inserting the identification of a speaker (e.g., “he said”) in the middle of a quote instead of preceding it which is awkward in oral storytelling. As David Rhoads and others have pointed out, a “translation for performance” is sorely needed. There are also instances when standard translations use words that are not dynamic equivalents to the original words and distort their

³⁷ According to Richard Nordquist, “In rhetoric, the use of the present tense to report on events from the past is called *translatio temporum* (‘transfer of times’).” “About Education,” September 26, 2014, <http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/histpreterm.htm>.

original meaning, or may be misunderstood in harmful ways by contemporary audiences.³⁸ A starting-from-scratch translation is beyond the scope of this project. Analysis will be based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV). Changes to this translation will be noted.

3. What is the **setting** of the story? What pointers to time and place are in the story? If none are given, can the setting be determined by knowing what came before or after?
4. Who are the **characters**, both those directly involved in the story (“on-stage”) and those who are referenced (“off stage”)? What, if any, description is given of the characters and what is the perspective of the description? Is it an inside view about emotion, knowledge, or state of mind? Or is at a more objective description from an observer’s perspective?
5. What concrete **objects** (both animate and inanimate) are present in the story—things, plants, animals?
6. Are there any specific, named **concepts** present in the story?
7. What is the **plot** of the story, the sequence of action and dialogue? Are there elements of surprise or conflict?
8. Are there **verbal threads** in the story? Verbal threads are repeated words or phrases. The repetition may be within the story itself, within its story context (as preserved in the canonical book), or within the whole of the biblical tradition. Verbal threads serve to add memory, provide structure, and to enhance meaning.

³⁸ Examples are the use of “Jews,” especially in the Gospel of John, and the exclusive use of male pronouns in reference to God.

9. What is the **structure** of the story? What are the breath units (phrases and sentences),³⁹ the episodes (a cohesive short segment usually consisting of two to three sentences),⁴⁰ the parts (logical divisions of the story with multiple episodes in each part), the sections (for long narratives such as the passion, death and resurrection story of Jesus, or for that matter an entire Gospel), and what are their relationships? The extent of these will depend on the length of the story.
10. What are the **norms of judgment** present in the story? Norms of judgment “are the criteria of good and bad, right and wrong, that provide the basis for the storyteller’s implicit appeals to the listeners.”⁴¹ Norms of judgment impact the attitude of the storyteller toward the story’s various characters and their behavior. They are then conveyed through tone of voice, facial expression, and gesture.

Storyteller

1. Experiential exegesis observes the storyteller’s flexible **identity**. At each point in the story, who is the storyteller? A difference between drama and storytelling is that actors fully embody their character, usually only one character in the story. Storytellers, however, are always, first and foremost, themselves. Only secondarily does the storyteller take on the persona of a character. Furthermore, the storyteller

³⁹ The technical terms from ancient Greek are “cola” and “period.” See the discussion of basic sound groups in Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009), 108-111.

⁴⁰ Boomershine identifies the episode as a storytelling unit based on his analysis of the original Greek. Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 24-28.

⁴¹ Boomershine, *Story Journey*, 75.

presents all the characters in the story, not just one. In any given telling, at various points the storyteller is the narrator as well as the various characters. Phil Ruge-Jones observes, “While a storyteller has options about when to portray a character and when not to, he or she must take on the persona of a character when that character speaks.”⁴²

2. Are there any **narrative comments** in the story? These aside comments occur when the storyteller intervenes in the storyline to speak directly to the audience in order to give information that the narrator thinks the audience needs in order to understand the story.⁴³ They are designated with tone of voice and eye contact, They may be accompanied by a change in body position (moving closer to the audience), gesture (a hand at the side of the mouth), or facial expression (for example, a knowing wink or a look of dismay).
3. How can the sounds of the story be transcribed in a **script** or “sound map”⁴⁴ to reflect how the storyteller has vocalized it with regard to tempo, pacing and pitch? In a script, new sentences begin on the left margin. Sentences often consist of multiple lines; those following the first line are indented. Each line should be said in one breath, which will automatically create a brief pause. If there are too many words in a line for it to fit on the page, the line will continue below with a double indent. Lines that are long will necessarily go fast in order to get through them in one breath; lines

⁴² Phil Ruge-Jones, “Mentored into Steadfast Love,” *The Living Pulpit* (August 2, 2013), accessed October 6, 2014, <http://www.pulpit.org/page/6/>.

⁴³ Boomershine, *Story Journey*, 75.

⁴⁴ For a definition and summarized description of technical sound mapping, see Lee and Scott, 167-168.

that are short will be said slowly and generally with more emphasis. Commas indicate a slight pause. Semi-colons or dashes indicate a slightly longer pause. With a comma the voice continues at the same pitch; with a semi-colon the pitch usually drops lower. A period indicates both a longer pause than a semi-colon and a definitive drop in the voice. Episodes of the story are delineated by a double space. At the end of a part, the voice drops and a substantial pause is given. For the audience, this pause allows time for images to form concerning what just transpired in the story. A lengthy pause also makes time for reflection, and for the story to “sink in” before continuing. For the storyteller, this is a time to focus on the next part of the story.

4. What is the **volume** and **tone** with which the storyteller delivers the story? Volume and tone are factors governed by stage directions in the story itself, knowledge of the norms of judgment of the original storyteller and audience, and emotions either stated directly by the story or inferred from its plot.
5. What **gestures**, **facial expressions**, and **postures** might the storyteller employ during the course of the telling?
6. Experiential exegesis describes **movements** that the storyteller would have made as suggested, or in some cases directed, by the story. Will the storyteller move from place to place during the course of the telling? If so, what is the blocking?
7. An embodied storytelling event necessitates the **placement** of various narrative components. What placement of characters, places or things might the storyteller have made to enhance visualization of the story?
8. What **mnemonic devices** are present in the story that can assist with its internalization and telling?

Audience

1. Who were the people in the **original audience** of the story and what was their context?
2. What were the **emotional appeals** of the story? These would include elements of humor, pathos, delight, remorse, etc.
3. With regard to the story's characters, what are the **dynamics of distance**? These have to do with the emotional relationships between the characters in the story and the audience. Dynamics of distance "range from intimacy and identification to hostility and alienation" and, according to Boomersshine, in a good story they "change constantly in the listener's relationship to the various characters."⁴⁵
4. Just as the storyteller has a flexible **identity**, so does the audience. Experiential exegesis will describe when the audience is being addressed as a character in the story, as opposed to observing that character on stage behind a "fourth wall."⁴⁶ The dynamics of this phenomenon, named "audience address"⁴⁷ by Tom Boomersshine, are responsible for much of the transformative potential in biblical storytelling. Thus, experiential exegesis asks if there is a point in the telling when the audience is addressed as a character in the story and thus invited to hear the words of the storyteller as being spoken directly to them in the present time and place. When this

⁴⁵ Boomersshine, *Story Journey*, 75.

⁴⁶ Another major difference between storytelling and drama is the absence of an imaginary wall around the action in the performing space.

⁴⁷ Thomas E. Boomersshine, "Audience Address and Purpose in the Performance of Mark," in *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 124-125.

occurs, “those hearing the text performed are drawn into the story and become characters addressed within the story world.”⁴⁸

5. What are the **experiential connections** that the original audience and storyteller were invited to make with this story? This task should be approached with humility, for in many cases the best that can be done in answering this question is an informed guess.
6. What, then, is the intended **impact** of the story on the audience? Impact has to do with the thoughts, feelings and/or actions evoked in response to encounter with the story. What did the story invite the audience to think, feel, or do?
7. In relation to the contemporary audience, what **connections, associations, and responses** are they likely to have? Each story will have a variety of possible connections, or hooks, which draw people into involvement and thereby into the possibility of being impacted by the story. This discussion may include examples from feedback of actual tellings.

This ministry model uses experiential exegesis in three ways. It was used in preparation for telling the stories of the project. Boomershine’s forthcoming commentary on Mark 14-16, *The Messiah of Peace*, provided the exegesis for project stories. Secondly, several key activities of the ministry model draw heavily from the fruit of experiential exegesis. And thirdly, in the following sections it will be used to explicate the stories which support the metaphor that names the project and grounds it in biblical tradition: the story from the First Testament is called “Dry Bones” (Ezekiel 37:1-14); the story from the Second Testament is called “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20: 19-23).

⁴⁸ Ruge-Jones, “Mentored into Steadfast Love.”

The Telling Venue for Both Stories

These two stories were told in the Montgomery County Jail as part of the experiential exegesis process. The space was a small, windowless classroom on the fourth floor of the jail. The room barely accommodates twenty people sitting in a circle. Extra chairs and a small table are shoved up against the walls directly behind the circle. The front wall has a large whiteboard and one door which is kept locked at all times except when entering and leaving. A button on the wall buzzes security. The temperature is controlled and comfortable. The time is early afternoon. The audience consists of 10-12 women: female inmates plus one or two church members helping to lead the program. The tellings are the centerpiece of the opening for a weekly spiritual empowerment program in the jail. About half of the participants are new to the class; many of them have never heard the stories.

Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

The Story

The story of “Dry Bones” comes toward the end of the epic⁴⁹ of Ezekiel. The prophet has spelled out in painful detail all the shortcomings of his people and the reasons for their defeat and captivity. Having made the judgment clear, he tells how God will act for God’s own sake to save the people of Israel and bring them out of captivity, back to their own land. This prophecy culminates with the image of “ruined towns filled with flocks of people,” (Ezek. 36:38) setting the stage for the story of Dry Bones:

⁴⁹ In order to use the language of orality and story rather than literacy the word “epic” will be used to refer to the oral tradition that encompasses all of what has been preserved in written form as the “book” of Ezekiel.

The hand of the Lord came upon me
 and brought me out by the spirit of the Lord
 and set me down in the middle of a valley.
 It was full of bones.

The spirit led me all around them.
 There were very many lying in the valley.
 And they were very dry.

The Lord said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"
 I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

.....

Then the Lord God said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them:
 O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God to these bones:
 I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
 I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin,
 and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded.
 And as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together,
 bone to its bone.
 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them,
 and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them.

.....

Then the Lord God said to me,
 "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath:
 Thus says the Lord God:
 Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."
 I prophesied as the Lord God commanded me,
 and the breath came into them,
 and they lived,
 and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

.....

Then the Lord God said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
 They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'

Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God:
 I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people,
 and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves,
 and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

.....

This script for telling the story follows the New Revised Standard Version. An exception is language for God. Referents to God have been changed to neutralize gender. The pronoun “he” is in the first instance eliminated and in subsequent occurrences replaced by whatever word most recently has been used in reference: “spirit,” “Lord, or “Lord God.” God is neither male nor female but when God is constantly addressed as male the image of God one develops is male. Male imagery for God grew out of a patriarchal social structure and has reinforced the same cultural patterns for millennia. On the assumption that patriarchy oppresses women and that it is time to develop new social patterns, one strategy for change is to alter language for God, particularly when it is going to be internalized as is the case with biblical storytelling.

The story divides rather neatly into four parts. It begins with an action phrase: “The hand of the Lord came upon me.” Part one then establishes the setting, introduces the characters and significant things of the story, and sets up the plot. The plot is a series of three commands to prophecy—one for each of the subsequent three parts which all begin with the same phrase: “Then the Lord God said to me . . . ” In parts two and three the command to prophecy constitutes the first episode, while the second episode reports the actual prophecy with its result. In part four, all three episodes relate God’s speech. There is no report of Ezekiel’s response, though his obedience to the prophetic task he is given is assumed since he has been obedient throughout the epic. The story concludes with promises of intimate relationship with God, new life, and return to the homeland.

The following story is introduced by the motif “The word of the Lord came to me” with new objects and instructions from God to Ezekiel.

The opening verses of Ezekiel establish a beginning date as the fifth year of the Babylonian exile (593 BCE) and locate it in Mesopotamia. This is the general setting for the Dry Bones story. There are a number of subsequent time markers, the closest preceding the Dry Bones story is news of the fall of Jerusalem. This news came to Ezekiel “in the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month” which would be comparable to January 19, 585 BCE (Ezek. 33:21). The Dry Bones story takes place in an unnamed valley—not a deep, curved recess like the valleys of Kentucky, but “a broad alluvial river basin typical of Mesopotamia.”⁵⁰ People have speculated about the specific location of this valley, often around the possibility that it was the site of a great battle in which many Israelite warriors were killed. But the story does not attempt to identify its location historically or geographically. It functions imaginatively as a place to which Ezekiel was transported by the Spirit of God. As noted by Aelred Cody, “the impact of the vision itself depends on its being abstracted from the limitations of time and place.”⁵¹ The most important identifier is what Ezekiel found lying there: many dry bones. It is a place of death and desolation.

The story has two main characters, the Lord and Ezekiel, who are introduced in the opening line—“The hand of the Lord came upon me”—which is Ezekiel’s characteristic way of describing the beginning of a vision.⁵² The Lord is embodied with a

⁵⁰ Note on Ezek 3:22 in The Harper Collins Study Bible, 1101.

⁵¹ Aelred Cody, O.S.B., *Ezekiel* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 175.

⁵² See also Ezek. 1:3, 3:22, 8:1, and 40:1.

“hand” that comes upon Ezekiel and leads him all around the valley. Yet the Lord is spirit who brings Ezekiel to the valley. The Hebrew word *ruach* is woven throughout the Dry Bones story with its three-fold meaning of spirit, breath, and wind. All relate to the presence and life-power of God. The Lord speaks and acts, characteristics underscored with the Lord’s self-description at the conclusion of the story. The Lord is a commanding presence, fully engaged and in control of the situation. This would be reassurance to a defeated, dispersed, and captive people.

The epic is told in the first person by Ezekiel himself. He recounts the visions and messages in an objective narrative style with little autobiographical detail. One exception occurs in the account of his wife’s death in which it is made known, not only that he had a wife, but that she was “the delight of [his] eyes” (Ezek. 24:16). But the Lord instructs him to refrain from normal lamentation practices and keep his feelings to himself: “Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead” (Ezek. 24:17). Similar instructions are given to the people in preparation for their impending disaster and monumental loss.

As recounted in the opening lines of the epic, Ezekiel was a priest who lived in Jerusalem until its first defeat by Nebuchadnezzar when he was deported to Babylon along with other leaders. There he received visions and messages from God to communicate to his exiled people. Cut off from the temple, he had no place to function as a priest. He was given a new role, prophet. In his description of ancient prophets Joseph Blenkinsopp speaks from the perspective of the performance criticism paradigm:

The people we call prophets were—to risk a generalization—public orators and emotional preachers rather than authors. They did not set out to write a book but to persuade by the spoken word.⁵³

Three times in the story Ezekiel is addressed by God as “mortal,”⁵⁴ emphasizing the radical distance between the two characters of the story.

Bones are a principal object in the story. They are introduced with the emphasis of a short sentence as the climax of an episode: “It was full of bones.” In the second episode their number is emphasized (“there were very many of them”) as is their condition (“they were very dry”). The latter comes at the end of the episode, another short, climatic phrase that warrants a significant pause in the telling to allow the image to sink in. These dry bones are the object of the Lord’s attention, message, and action. Their number, their dryness, their being strewn about unburied, their description as “these slain” in part 3, all point to a long history of violence.

In the last part of the story the Lord identifies the bones as the “whole house of Israel”—that is, all the people who have been divided and dispersed through years of war. Further, the Lord identifies their communal state of mind as lacking all power (“our bones are dried up”), all hope (“our hope is gone”), and all connection (“we are cut off completely”). God telling what the bones say cleverly communicates the inside view of an entire nation of people. Who can argue with divine perception? In the concluding episode of the story, the Lord references another object closely related to dry bones: graves.

The plot of the story unfolds quite logically:

⁵³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 1.

⁵⁴ Other translations use “son of man” or “mortal man” which have the disadvantage of patriarchal language but are more consistent with the original language.

Part 1. Ezekiel has a spirit-inspired experience of being set down in the middle of a wide valley filled with dry bones, and moving among them. The dilemma of the story is established when the Lord asks him if the bones can live. Ezekiel wisely defers to the Lord's judgment about that.

Part 2. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to the bones that they will be restored to new life with breath, sinews, flesh, and skin. He does, and the bones came together with sinews, flesh and skin, but without breath.

Part 3. Ezekiel is told to prophecy to the breath. He does, and the breath enters. The "vast multitude" then stand on their feet. These are not zombies; they are fully alive with the spirit of God breathed into them.

Part 4. The Lord interprets who these are that are standing and how they feel, announcing what will be done about it and what will be the result. The Lord will put the Lord's spirit in them, restore them to their land, and expect them to realize the divine source of their redemption. The question raised in Part 1 about whether or not the bones could live is answered in the affirmative.

Norms of judgment present in this story revolve around the bones as remains of dead bodies that were not properly cared for. Sensibilities about clean and unclean would come into play here, so along with being a symbol of death, the scattered bones represent a state of gross uncleanness. The concept of being unclean was connected in the previous story with the people's unfaithfulness to God. Their promised cleansing was attributed exclusively to the will and work of God: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses" (Ezek. 36:25). In the same way, the defilement of death will be removed by the freely given Spirit of God. And it is the

obedience of the prophet in telling the message he is commanded to tell that makes possible the opportunity for new life, the restoration of hope, and the return to community. The vocation of biblical storytelling with incarcerated men and women continues such prophetic obedience.

The Storyteller

Part 1. Given the small room of the telling venue, the storyteller⁵⁵ begins from a seated position. She speaks in a calm, steady, strong voice to deliver the line known to signify an impending experience with God: “The hand of the Lord came upon me.” There is no eye contact with the audience as the storyteller enters a kind of trance such as Ezekiel would have experienced. This line might be accompanied by a raised arm outstretched with palm down, slowly moving up and slowly moving down, then moving back to open up a vision of the valley. While the arm lowers to the side, a long dramatic pause allows the storyteller and the audience to look in that space between them established as the valley. Then the storyteller might connect with the audience through eye contact while delivering the climactic phrase slowly with emphasis and a sense of horror: “It was full of bones.”

As the second episode begins, the storyteller returns to her introspective state, looking down at the bones and moves the arm in a figure eight to indicate being led all around them. The episode ends with a sigh of deep sorrow with the short, concluding phrase “they were very dry” said slowly, dirge-like. The eyes are downcast, the posture drooping.

⁵⁵ The storyteller will be referenced as female in this chapter.

Both the tempo and the tone pick up when the Lord starts speaking in episode three. The storyteller might experiment with different volumes to see what fits best: from a soft voice, almost a whisper, as well as a come-to-attention voice to draw the storyteller out of her sorrow. The spine straightens and the head comes up, perhaps with a sideways tilt and glance to indicate the question from one to another. Ezekiel's response is delivered with a shake of the head, perhaps another sigh and a tone of doubtful resignation. There is no eye contact with the audience during this episode as it depicts dialogue between the Lord and the prophet.

Part 2. The phrase "Then the Lord God said to me" begins each of the remaining three parts of the story. It is said quickly in a neutral voice as Ezekiel recounts what happened. The instructions to prophesy which follow are vocalized with clear articulation, moderate speed, and an everything-is-under-control-here attitude. The hand might be raised in a stylized rhetorical gesture, bringing it down during the brief pause before the next episode.

The second episode begins at a slow pace with emphasis on the word "breath." The hands might stretch out from the sides of the mouth toward the audience at an angle. Emphasis continues on each word of the conclusion of that sentence, especially the last one: "and . . . you . . . shall . . . LIVE." This phrase is a verbal thread repeated at the end of the next sentence, twice in episode three with slight variations, and again word-for-word at the end of the story. The message is not to be missed and the promise is sure. The attitude to convey here and again throughout the story is, "I am the Lord and there is no question about this happening if I say it will happen." The sentence about the sinews, flesh, skin, and breath is a long one and so moves along quickly, perhaps accompanied by

gestures of stroking alternate arms. The sequence of body parts can be remembered by thinking from the inside out: bones, sinews (tendons), flesh (muscles), all covered by skin and animated by breath. “And you shall know that I am the Lord” is a verbal thread connecting this beginning of God’s Word in the story to its ending. It should be said with the same no-nonsense attitude mentioned above.

The ball is now back in Ezekiel’s court. It is easy to remember the next episode because it follows so logically on the heels of God’s command: “So I prophesied as I had been commanded.” This line presents an opportunity for the storyteller to re-connect with the audience. A bit of lightness could be introduced into this otherwise heavy story by the enthusiasm and energy of compliance. The storyteller wants to be sure the audience knows that she, as Ezekiel, has done what she was told. In the remainder of the episode the storyteller, portraying Ezekiel’s perspective, describes what happened as a result of the prophesying with increasing volume, speed and amazement. First she describes something heard (cock the head in a gesture of listening, bring the fingers together to indicate the coming together of the bones), then something seen (repeat the gestures accompanying the repeated words about sinews, flesh, and skin). The vocalization radically downshifts with the concluding phrase of Part 2: “But there was no breath in them.” This is said quietly, slowly, with an air of disappointment. The storyteller looks at the audience sadly shaking her head.

Part 3. This is the shortest part of the story, easy for the storyteller to remember because it follows the same pattern as the previous part: instruction to prophesy, compliance, and results. The use of voice and gesture may also follow suit with “the breath came into them” delivered in even greater amazement than the coming of sinews,

etc. The next phrase—“and stood on their feet”—is an obvious invitation for the storyteller to stand up and also to indicate by gesture (raise both arms) for the audience to stand up. For the remainder of the story the storyteller maintains eye contact with the audience. They become the “vast multitude” (spoken slowly with great emphasis) when the storyteller widens her outstretched arms and moves her body in a scan to include them all. The stage is now set for the final powerful scene of the story.

Part 4. The words of God addressed to Ezekiel at the beginning of Part 4 are delivered in a manner that maintains the audience’s identity as the people. “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel...” is spoken like an explanatory aside, though one directed not by the storyteller to the audience, but rather one delivered by God to Ezekiel. This is accomplished by gesturing toward the audience in a listening stance and speaking God’s words in a gentle tone. “And they say...” introduces the ultimate inside view: God speaking what is on the hearts of the people. When the Lord quotes the people, the storyteller might invite audience members to repeat “Our bones are dried up...” This will deepen audience identification with the people of Israel, already established in the act of standing, and set them up for a powerful experience of God’s redemptive love in the next episodes. The three laments should be said with increasing distress. Be prepared for the repeating to continue beyond the laments unless there is a strong cue given to stop. If the repeating does continue (as was the case in the jail telling), there will be a mutual benediction. The storyteller speaking as God to the audience blesses them with the promise of new life. The audience speaking as God to the storyteller blesses her with the same promise.

The command to prophesy with its familiar phrases is delivered as before. But the tone changes with the actual prophecy that runs through the rest of the story. The distance is closed between God and God's people through the incredible, beautiful promises God makes. The storyteller's tone conveys both the power and the compassion of God's unconditional love, especially poignant in the repeated phrase "O my people." It is said very slowly, like a caress, the second time. Simple, elegant full-arm gestures of opening, bringing up and bringing back are appropriate. The hand to the heart with a soft pat could compliment the phrase "I will put my spirit within you." In delivering the last line with full audience engagement, the storyteller should muster up her strongest faith conviction about divine will, power, steadfast mercy and everlasting love.

The Audience

The original context for this story was summarized in the introduction to this chapter: the days of the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE when it seemed to the Israelites that all had been lost through the violence of war and the greed of empire. The original audiences of this story were people who had experienced the loss of family, friends, leaders, homes, and freedom. Their holy city and its glorious temple lay in ruins along with their way of life. God was either absent or powerless. Belief systems that had worked to make sense of reality had apparently failed.

This story begins in a place of death, a condition of permanent uncleanness, a valley of dry bones. The original audience had been conquered and exiled by a Gentile enemy. The connections would be immediately apparent to them. They may be offended or pained at the reminder of their situation, but more likely will appreciate its exposure,

especially when visited by the Lord and the prophet's attention. In previous stories of the epic the audience has received explanation for their situation: a consequence of breaking God's laws. The unfolding drama of this story gives them a reason to hope for the possibility of new life. That hope is grounded in the power, will, and love of God for them, as communicated through the prophet/storyteller. The audience is encouraged to experience God's presence along with Ezekiel, to hear God's voice delivered by the storyteller, to trust God's power and promises, and, finally, to feel God's love. All that God does is credited to God's desire that the people know God: God *is*, and God is *for* them.

This story is all about dynamics of distance—the distance between the immortality of God and the mortality of the audience. The starting point is extreme distance. The Lord is away; the audience is invited to observe a field of bones. Because of the norm of judgment about uncleanness associated with dead bodies, the original audience would have felt alienated by the vision, perhaps aghast that the Lord and Ezekiel were moving all around those bones. To the extent that the audience identifies with the bones, as unholy remnants they are also distanced from the holy One. During the course of the story the distance of relationship with God decreases because (1) the bones take on life, (2) the audience is directly addressed as the bones/people, (3) God demonstrates inside knowledge of the people's emotions, and (4) God's address becomes increasingly intimate.

At the end of the story, God is still completely *Other*, but the distance has been eliminated at God's initiative by God's indwelling spirit. The impact of the story is most likely the experience of forgiveness for breaking God's laws and of restoration to right

relationship. It is the relief of despair by a new source of hope, a breath of divine air for dry bones. The story invites the audience to consider both the nature and the sources of their hopes. It encourages the audience to recall the disasters of their life, which left them lying like so many dry bones slain in a valley, and to reflect on their degree of trust in God to overcome the losses of those disasters. The strongest invitation is to experience the presence and power of God within their own being, bringing life and hope with each breath.

Many of these same dynamics are readily experienced by audiences today, especially audiences of incarcerated persons. They, too, have been captured and taken away from their community. They have lost friends and family by being locked away; some have lost them through rejection. Their situation is a result of society's judgment that they have disobeyed the law. Many experience depression ("our bones are dried up"), hopelessness ("our hope is gone"), and isolation ("we are cut off completely"). The story then can have a similar impact on this audience as it had on the original one.

The possibility of these connections was actualized when this story was told to a circle of nine women in jail. Following the telling, a "check-in" round elicited these responses: "The story evoked emotion—God can do that for me"; "I feel blessed—my dry bones are living for Christ"; "I am feeling grateful; I was depressed, now I'm back to an upswing." One woman reflected with a tone of scandal about her self-destructive behavior and then expressed hope that God might give her new life, too. Interestingly, while the inmates responded in these ways, the outside co-leader most strongly connected

with the final line (as did the storyteller) expressing frustration with all the injustices in today's world and the wish that God would, indeed, *act* to do something about them.⁵⁶

A tragic connection of this story with contemporary experience is “the killing fields” of Cambodia. From 1974-1979 close to 1.4 million people were executed by the Khmer Rouge and buried in mass graves. One of these sites is now a memorial to the suffering experienced by the people of Cambodia: Choeung Ek near the capital city of Phnom Penh. The centerpiece is a large Buddhist stupa filled with layers of skulls of the victims. A person walking around the shallow graves of the killing fields may encounter clothes and bones which continue to surface during heavy rains. It is an all too literal experience of the valley—the fields—of dry bones that Ezekiel described. Cambodia, like Israel, has experienced new life and, while still challenged with many struggles, is a vibrant and hopeful country.

There are those in jail or prison, especially if they are part of a program like Horizon, who can identify and then function like Ezekiel. They can provide a prophetic witness to God's Word for the sake of other inmates. Ezekiel was one of the exiles, a captive experiencing all the pain that other exiles suffered. He was a leader chosen by God who accepted the calling to prophesy judgment for wrongs done in the past. In this story he follows the divine directive to prophecy confidence in a just, attentive, and active God whose Spirit breathes new life into defeated people. Through learning, telling, and teaching the stories of God, inmates can be like Ezekiel, both for the sake of those inside, and, upon release, for the sake of those back in their home communities.

⁵⁶ Notes from Circle of the Word session at the Montgomery County Jail on September 8, 2014.

Behind Locked Doors (John 20:19-23)

The Story

When it was evening on that day,
 the first day of the week,
 and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked,
 for fear of the Judeans,
 Jesus came and stood among them and says, "Peace be with you,"
 and he showed them his hands and his side.

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you.
 As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and says to them,
 "Receive the Holy Spirit.
 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.
 If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This transcription of the story varies from the NRSV translation in two significant ways. Both variations change the meaning of the story. In the opening sentence the Greek word *Ioudaioi* is translated "Judeans" rather than "Jews" (NRSV). This word change is made for the sake of greater historical accuracy as well as to avoid anti-Semitic interpretations which have made John's Gospel infamous and which were not originally intended.⁵⁷ As articulated by Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in their study of John from the perspective of social science, the twenty-first century understanding of the meaning of the word "Jews" is significantly different than that of the first century. Of the seventy instances in John where the term appears, they write:

... there is nothing of the modern connotations of "Jew" or "Jewishness." Hence, it is simply inappropriate to project those modern meanings backward into the period when John was written. Rather, Judean meant a person belonging to a group called Judeans, situated geographically and

⁵⁷ For a summary of this viewpoint, see "It's 'Judeans' Not 'Jews'" by David Ewart, accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.holytextures.com>.

forming a territory taking its name from its inhabitants, Judea . . . The correlatives of Judean in John are “Galilean” and “Perean,” and together they make up Israel.⁵⁸

David Ewart, a United Church of Christ minister in Vancouver, British Columbia in Canada, succinctly summarizes the case for the word change on his website and presses further for the use of “Judean authorities” for even more clarity.⁵⁹

The second change in translation is a recovery of the historical present in two of the introductions to Jesus’ speech, creating the characteristic sense of immediacy which use of that tense brings. There are two instances of the historical present in the original Greek of this story which are ignored in the NRSV translation. Both are with regard to the word that introduces Jesus’ speech: “says” rather than “said.” These occur when Jesus first speaks to his disciples in episode one, and again in episode three when he speaks after breathing on them. These uses of the historical present tense serve to bring the past into the present where the story is most likely to be experienced as relevant to the lives of its audience.

A third way in which this script varies from the NRSV is with regard to punctuation. The original Greek transcription of the stories was not punctuated, nor were upper case letters used to designate the beginning of a new sentence. Scripts developed for oral storytelling differ in formatting from the literate structure of modern Bibles like the NRSV. Commonly, literate styles break up the long sentences characteristic of orality. The conjunction *kai* (usually translated “and”) is often used to keep the

⁵⁸ Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 44-45. The territory is specifically “located in the southern and western part of the Roman province of Syria-Palestine.”

⁵⁹ David Ewart, “It’s ‘Judeans’ Not ‘Jews’,” *Holy Textures* (blog), accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.holytextures.com/2011/02/its-judeans-not-jews.html>.

momentum building with a series of connected phrases that are all part of one long sentence (breath unit). High-literates avoid such constructions in written documents, naming them “run-on” sentences. They frequently break the phrases into separate sentences. In storytelling, however, they function effectively as a single breath unit. In this case, the building excitement of a long series of phrases in the original Greek is maintained. The tempo will necessarily increase until the sentence culminates with the notice about Jesus showing his hands and side. That statement is not broken off as a separate sentence.

This story is one of several about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. It follows the report of what happened at the tomb on the morning of Jesus’ resurrection. It is immediately preceded by Mary’s announcement to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” It describes what happened on the evening of that same day. It is followed by the story of how Thomas came to see the risen Jesus a week later and was convinced that his resurrection really occurred.

This is a one-scene, three-part story with two characters. One character is Jesus; the other is a composite character, the disciples. The story is structured around three plot movements initiated by Jesus. Part one establishes the setting, introduces the characters and gives the first plot movement. All of this is accomplished in one long sentence comprised of a series of six phrases. The first phrase gives the time and day, which is then underscored in a second phrase. The next two phrases describe the setting, and the last two bring the characters on stage and initiate the action. Episode two describes the disciples’ response to Jesus’ unexpected appearance, and then gives the next plot movement. Episode three concludes the story with a final act of Jesus.

The story is set in the evening on “that day”—a reference to the previous story about Mary encountering the risen Christ at the tomb. A follow-up phrase about it being “the first day of the week” emphasizes the time marker in biblical language. In modern terms, it is Sunday evening. The scene takes place in the room where the disciples were gathered.

Jesus is the main character in this story. He is the main character in the larger context of the Gospel of John. He has been described over the course of the epic with a number of powerful metaphors such as the Word, the light of the world, the lamb of God, the good shepherd, and the true vine. Jesus is a teacher, a healer, and a purveyor of signs. Many of his followers think he is the one God has chosen to deliver them from Roman domination—the Messiah—though they misunderstand what kind of messiah he will be. They want a messiah like David who will destroy enemies; Jesus is a messiah who overcomes enemies with love. He offends and frightens the Judean authorities with his words, actions, and with his loyal following.

Because Jesus is a threat to the prevailing political order, he is condemned to death by the religious leaders and executed by the Romans as a would-be “king of the Jews”—in other words, as an insurrectionist. In the course of that execution his hands were mutilated by being nailed to a cross and his side was pierced with a spear. In the world of this story it is now the third day after his death. Jesus has talked to Mary Magdalene in resurrected form and sent her to tell his disciples about his impending ascension to God.

Despite this good news, the disciples are sequestered behind locked doors. It is assumed that this group of disciples is Jesus’ inner circle—those he called, taught, and

lived with in his traveling school—minus Thomas (the next story describes his absence) and Judas (who betrayed Jesus). Unlike the epics told by Matthew and Mark, John does not describe the disciples running away after Jesus’ arrest. We do know, however, that they have gathered in this room and locked the door because they are afraid. It is a safe assumption that they are afraid they will be arrested and perhaps executed, as was their teacher. Even though at their last supper together Jesus gave a long discourse meant to prepare them spiritually and psychologically for this situation, and even though Mary has informed them that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is returning to God, the disciples are hiding fearfully behind locked doors.

The doors function as an important detail in the story because their being locked provides an inside view of the disciples’ emotional state. The reason given to explain their being locked is that the disciples are afraid of the Judeans, those who had instigated their leader’s death. Locked doors also function to highlight the supernatural aspect of Jesus. His presence with them is not inhibited by worldly factors. He can suddenly appear in their midst despite locked doors. The image is somewhat like the teleportation phenomenon of “Star Trek” fame.⁶⁰

A norm of judgment operating in this story is that students obey their teachers and trust their teachings. Earlier in the Gospel Jesus had spoken to his disciples at length about what was about to happen and how God would help them cope (Jn 14). He had spoken clearly about how he would soon leave them, and promised to send them an

⁶⁰ As an aside, “Beam me up, Scotty” was never actually said in any Star Trek television series or film. Like other famous misquotations that can be verified through audiovisual evidence, it is a product of secondary oral culture. This contemporary phenomenon provides interesting data for understanding the dynamics of the primary oral culture which gave us our biblical tradition. For details on the phrase, see <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2013/10/beam-scotty-never-said-original-star-trek> 9/29/2014.

advocate, the Holy Spirit. He had made every effort to prepare them for the challenges of the future: to console them beforehand in the face of loss, to assure them they would not be left alone without guidance, and to encourage them to remain faithful disciples despite adversity. He gave them his peace and then addressed the issue of fear head-on: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Consequently, the original audience might have judged the disciples negatively for being afraid. They might have thought poorly of the disciples’ hiding out behavior in light of their teacher’s eloquent discourse in his last hours with them, just three days earlier.

The three movements of the plot, corresponding with the three parts of the story are as follows:

Part 1: Jesus Appears. Jesus appears in the room with his frightened disciples, greets them, and shows them his hands and his side. Why does he do this? Presumably to prove to them it is really him, Jesus, their beloved teacher who was recently crucified.

Part 2: Jesus Commissions. The natural consequence of the first plot movement is that the disciples rejoice. Jesus then repeats what he just said and adds a commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Part 3: Jesus Empowers. The third plot movement is Jesus breathing on his disciples with the interpretive statement: “Receive the Holy Spirit” which empowers them to fulfill the commission he has just administered. The story concludes with a descriptive statement about their power to forgive.

A significant verbal thread in this story is the phrase “Peace be with you” which ties together the first two parts. Its use in the first part could be simply as a standard

ancient near eastern salutation. It does, however, carry overtones of the gift of peace Jesus offered his disciples at the last supper (Jn 14:27). It also points back to the concluding exhortation of that discourse: “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace” (Jn 16:33). In part two, the exact repetition of the phrase “Peace be with you” indicates that Jesus is saying something much weightier than a simple greeting. He is, in fact, reminding them of all he said to them before, emphasizing the truth of what he said before, and again both offering and exhorting peace—that they not be anxious, afraid, or vengeful.

Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples is a verbal thread to his “high priestly prayer” in which he says, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:18). In that case he is talking to God about the disciples and describing an action he has already taken. Now, in his post-resurrection appearance he speaks directly to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Surely they will pay attention and believe him this time.

The Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma*, have the same range of meanings: wind, breath and spirit. Ezekiel plays on this multivalency in the story of Dry Bones. John takes advantage of it as well, both in the story of Nicodemus at the beginning of his gospel, and in this story near its end. The verbal thread between breath and spirit in part three is lost in English, but the connections are not lost to the promise of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ last supper discourse. For those steeped in the scriptures, as many of John’s audiences would have been, this image of a divine figure breathing on despairing people to instill them with the spirit for the sake of new life would also have been a verbal thread connecting John’s story with Ezekiel’s prophecy.

The mention of Jesus' hands and side connects this story with that of his death, thereby reminding the audience of the complicity of the Judean authorities with the Romans toward that end. The disciples' fear was understandable. It also provides a reminder that Jesus definitely died. The Judean authorities asked Pilate to have the legs of the three crucified men broken so that they would die and their bodies could be removed before the Sabbath. The soldiers followed Pilate's orders and broke the legs of the men crucified on either side of Jesus, but when they came to Jesus they found he was already dead. So instead of breaking his legs, they pierced his side with a spear (Jn 19:31-37).

The Storyteller

Part 1. The storyteller begins telling the story in a neutral tone at a medium pace. The pitch will probably drop in an explanatory aside with a knowing tone, emphasizing that the impending action will take place at the same time early Christian communities gathered to worship: the evening of the first day of the week. The pitch then resumes its initial level. The next two phrases about the doors being locked are conveyed with mild intensity reflecting the danger the disciples may be in, and perhaps also a note of disapproval reflecting the norm of judgment discussed above. In contrast, as the narrator brings Jesus into the story, her tone is one of increasing amazement and joy, accompanied by an increase in both volume and tempo.

The storyteller's gestures and movement might include:

first day of the week—a shift of the body toward the audience, raising the hand close to the chest and slightly punctuating the words;

were locked—striking one open hand with the fist of the other;

stood among them—moving arms down and slightly out in front toward audience (to help them identify with the disciples), palms facing audience and fingers together;

“Peace be with you”—raising one hand in a stylized gesture of greeting/blessing, direct eye contact with the audience;

his hands and his side—showing hands to the audience, then placing hand lightly on side.

Part 2. After a pause allowing the scene to unfold in the imagination of the audience and the connections to sink in (assuming they have heard the earlier stories of John’s epic), the storyteller resumes the story in a celebrative tone with high energy to describe the disciples’ joyful response to seeing their Lord. The storyteller might interrupt narration with clapping and cheering and invite the audience to join in the celebration.

When the time seems right, the storyteller resumes in a calm, quiet, but loving tone, accompanied with a smile, to deliver Jesus’ repeat of “Peace be with you.” The storyteller engages the audience with direct eye contact as before, taking time to scan the audience. The words are the same, but are spoken more slowly and with greater emphasis, to capture the full attention of the audience for the commissioning which follows. This time “Peace be with you” may be accompanied by a gesture of both hands up with palms facing the audience. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” can be accompanied by gestures first toward the self, then toward the audience.

Part 3. The storyteller narrates the action of the last part of the story in the neutral style with which she began. Before saying “he breathed on them” the storyteller may want to pause, take a deep breath, and quietly exhale—just a suggestion of the action, not an attempt to re-create it (which most likely would end up being experienced as hokey). Another possibility is to inhale with the first part of the sentence and then exhale while saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Eye contact with the audience is established and maintained through the end of the story.

The last two lines about forgiving or retaining sins are delivered with calm and sobriety, but with nuanced differences. The line about forgiveness of sins might be said with warmth, accompanied by a slight smile and a gesture of open hands. The line about retention of sins would be said with less warmth, no smile and a tone communicating “this will be a problem.” The gesture would be closing the open hands into fists and then crossing the arms across the body. Or, as the women in the jail suggested, bringing the hands behind the body crossed at the wrists as if in handcuffs.

The Audience

In traditional exegetical work the audience of John has been assumed to be Gentile Christian readers. A new understanding of the audience has developed through biblical performance criticism and experiential exegesis. Analysis of the Gospel of John from this perspective yields a different picture of the constituency of the original audience as well as of how they experienced John’s story about Jesus. Study of the interwoven dynamics of audience address and identity led Tom Boomershine to conclude, “Insofar as our goal is to understand and interpret the Fourth Gospel in its

original historical context, it is essential to hear the story as performed for audiences that were predominantly composed of late-first-century Jews.”⁶¹ The original meaning of John’s Gospel is at many points quite different when the story is understood as a live performance experienced by an attentive group of Jews, rather than a book read by individual Gentiles.

What, then, were some general characteristics of this late-first-century Jewish audience? By the time John’s story of Jesus was in circulation in the last decade of the first century, the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah had once again experienced the total destruction of their holy city, their temple and their way of life. It happened during the previous generation, some twenty to thirty years earlier. They lived in an unstable and uncertain environment. As in the days of Ezekiel, many had been killed, many enslaved, and many deported. At best, they were at risk of cultural assimilation; at worst, they risked persecution, ostracism, and death. Jesus’ action showing his hands and side is a vivid reminder to the audience of his crucifixion, of Roman domination, and of the complicity of Judean religious authorities. Like their forebears during the Babylonian exile and Jesus’ first disciples, this was an audience who had experienced death. Many were locked up in fear and despair. Others were imprisoned by anger and the desire for revenge. Still others were held captive by the turmoil of anxiety.

In the story of “Behind Locked Doors” the risen Jesus is once again addressing his beloved disciples. First century audiences, experiencing the story as oral storytelling, might initially be distanced from the disciples because of their show of fear and lack of

⁶¹ Thomas E. Boomershine, “The Medium and Message of John: Audience Address and Audience Identity in the Fourth Gospel” 92-120 in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture*, ed. Anthony LeDonne and Tom Thatcher (London, England: T & T Clark, 2011), 120.

trust in Jesus. But when Jesus suddenly appears and greets them lovingly that distance collapses. They are invited into close identification with the disciples and experience the storyteller as Jesus speaking to them as his disciples. Boomershine describes this phenomenon and explains how it impacts the audience:

The impact of the story is to engage the audience in a dynamic and passionate interaction with Jesus as a character who directly addressed them throughout the story. The message implicit in the Gospel was to appeal to Jewish listeners to move through the conflicts of engagement with Jesus to belief in Jesus as the Messiah.⁶²

Somehow this “belief in Jesus as the Messiah” had to overcome the daunting evidence to the contrary resulting from his crucifixion and death.

First century audiences in the ancient near east were all too familiar with crucifixion. It was a punishment inflicted by Romans on “rebellious provincials for incitement to rebellion and acts of treason, whom they considered common ‘bandits’”⁶³ Its intent was control by terror, much as lynching served to control African Americans in recent history. It was done by “spreading apart the arms of a live victim, so that he/she could be affixed to the crossbeam by ropes or nails.”⁶⁴ The person was left there until he could no longer hold himself up to breathe. Jesus had been nailed to a crossbeam, the evidence of which he showed with his hands. The reality of death he showed with his side.

This evidence—wounds to hands and side—does not lead audience members to dwell on the horror of crucifixion. Insofar as they identify with the disciples they see it as

⁶² Boomershine, “The Medium and Message of John,” 94.

⁶³ Jodi Magness, *Stone and Dung, Oil and Spit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 166.

⁶⁴ Magness, 167.

evidence of his resurrection. They also rejoice, as the experience of Jesus as the risen Messiah sinks in. The strength of the impact of this particular story depends in part upon how much of the complete Gospel the audience has experienced. Have they heard his call, witnessed his signs, and listened to his teaching? Original audiences would have experienced all this in an oral performance of the epic. The audience remembers how Jesus had told them “You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28). They now follow his suggestion: they rejoice as Jesus’ disciples.

This prepares the audience to hear—and this time to truly believe— Jesus’ subsequent words of peace, commissioning, and empowerment. In the wake of all that happened in the world outside their small community of faith, they could not follow Jesus’ instructions as given when he was with them the first time. He has come again, in resurrected form to say it again: “Don’t be anxious, be at peace. Calm your fears and your anger, be at peace. Go into the world as I have to demonstrate God’s love.”

Not only does Jesus speak to his disciples again, he also performs an act: he breathes on them. The original audience, whose sacred scriptural tradition at this point is the law and the prophets, would likely be well acquainted with how in the beginning God breathed life into the human God created (Gen 2:7), and how in the exile God’s spirit breathed life into dry bones. In the sixth century BCE, during the exile, there emerged a new understanding of God, a new way of living faithfully within a hostile environment, and a new means of worship apart from the Temple. From dry bones strewn in a valley of violence came the synagogue and Sabbath piety.

In the first century CE, in the aftermath of the Jewish War, a fresh understanding of God was told, a means of worship without the Temple developed, and the power to pursue holiness was given. From a handful of frightened people came the Gospels and the church. John's story of Jesus appearing to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection empowered those developments. It enabled the audience to perceive Jesus as the Messiah who brings peace inside locked doors for the sake of peace everywhere. It brought them joy, revived their hopes, strengthened their spirits, and compelled them to act.

Those who heard this story were commissioned to go out into the world as Jesus had: with words of reconciliation and acts of mercy. In order to do this they needed the power of forgiveness, both for wrong-doings they committed and for wrong-doings they suffered. Jesus' final words in this story are traditionally interpreted as a mandate for institutional privilege, and a divisive one at that.⁶⁵ An alternative understanding, gleaned from listening to the story as story, is that Jesus is presenting an important choice the disciples (and hence the audience) will make.⁶⁶ In succinct language he describes the dynamics of response to wrong-doing. Those who forgive wrong-doing will be freed from the bondage of fear, shame, and anger. Those who hold on to the effects of wrong-doing will remain in bondage to them and will inflict them on others. At Horizon this dynamic is also described succinctly: "Trauma not treated is trauma transferred."⁶⁷ The first disciples and other first-century Jews all experienced trauma at the hand of the

⁶⁵ A description of this interpretation and the arguments about it between Protestants and Catholics is outlined in Raymond Brown's commentary on the Gospel of John.

⁶⁶ Thomas E. Boomershine, "A Storytelling Commentary on John 20:19-31," GoTell Communications, accessed October 6, 2014, http://www.gotell.org/pdf/commentary/John/Jn20_19-31_commentary.pdf.

⁶⁷ Trauma treatment is a critical component of the Horizon program.

Romans. Jesus breathed on them and told them to receive the Holy Spirit, who gives them the ability to forgive, should they so choose.

Connections to this story for those who are incarcerated are similar to connections with the Dry Bones story, if not even more obvious. Telling the story in a small locked room to a small group of jailed women creates a powerful setup for Jesus' appearance and greeting of peace. Whether or not they are familiar with the Gospel (and many are not) the direct connections of locked doors, fear, and need for peace puts them in a position to be strongly impacted by this story. When asked what gesture to use with the last line about retaining sins the women immediately put their hands behind their backs as if they were handcuffed. When asked to tell their stories of locking doors out of fear, they readily told stories about barricading bedroom doors to keep out men, or because a relative had been shot or a neighbor attacked.

In many ways incarcerated persons have experiences that are like those of the original audience: old way of life disrupted or altogether gone; loss of family and friends; an uncertain future; temptations and threats within and without; embedded memory of trauma; experiences of guilt, shame, and humiliation; domination by the criminal justice system; bondage to fear, anxiety, shame, anger, and despair. Most women in jail or prison, as well as men, have experienced abuse themselves and often have transferred that abuse to others. Jesus' words about forgiveness connect with their experience.

Many inmates in the Circle of the Word have been part of a faith community and now seek renewed commitment. They need a source of meaning and empowerment, which can be received if they experience Jesus breathing his spirit on them and sending them out to share God's love with their cellmates, guards, and families. The story of

Jesus appearing to his frightened disciples in the aftermath of his resurrection is a potential resource to address many needs and desires of people living, literally, behind locked doors. The next chapter will take a look at English history to explore how particular individuals addressed these needs out of their commitment to follow Christ behind locked doors.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction: “The Attention of Angels”

In June of 1822 the American politician John Randolph¹ travelled to England and introduced himself to a Quaker minister named Elizabeth Fry. Mrs. Fry was getting ready to visit women at Newgate prison. She “was so extremely pleased with his most original conversation”² that she took him along. Two days later Mr. Randolph told an acquaintance about his experience:

I saw the greatest curiosity in London; aye, and in England, too, sir—compared to which, Westminster Abbey, the Tower, Somerset House, the British Museum, nay Parliament itself, sink into utter insignificance! I have seen, sir, Elizabeth Fry, of Newgate, and I have witnessed there, sir, miraculous effects of true Christianity upon the most depraved of human beings . . . Oh! Sir, it was a sight worthy the attention of angels!³

Perhaps it was this effusive description of Mrs. Fry which inspired Edward Ryder to quote the King James version of Matthew 26:13 on the title page of his 1883 biography: “Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world,

¹Congressional Representative from Virginia at the time, later Senator and minister to Russia; cousin of Thomas Jefferson and radical proponent of states’ rights.

²Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*, vol. 2 (1856; 11th ed., New York, NY: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 186.

³ Garland, 185.

there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.”⁴ It is hard to imagine higher praise than comparison to the woman who anointed Jesus (Mark 14:9).

Thanks to a lifelong discipline of keeping a journal and two daughters who published them posthumously, we have access to the interior life of Elizabeth Fry. And so we can know with relative certainty that she would have had mixed feelings about such extravagant praise. On the one hand, she needed signs of acceptance and affirmation from her fellow humans, both for her own peace of mind and for the sake of the causes to which she devoted her life. On the other hand, she was ever on guard against temptations to pride and believed that God, not she, was due all credit for good results. Certainly she would have objected to Randolph’s characterization of the women she visited as “depraved” and “worse, if possible, than the devil himself” which he went on to say. Her references to female inmates were always accompanied with compassion and understanding.

These objections aside, Randolph rightly named the event he witnessed. What happened at Newgate and in prisons throughout the Western world due to the work of Elizabeth Fry is indeed “worthy the attention of angels”—not to mention that of humans. Those who went before her laid the foundation. During the eighteenth century Christian conviction mobilized certain persons to engage in dangerous, distasteful, and difficult challenges regarding the criminal justice system and those subject to its machinery. They represented a broad spectrum of the British Protestant community: Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist, Quaker. Knowing precedents and the stories of Elizabeth Fry’s predecessors contributes to understanding and appreciating her work. This chapter will

⁴Garland, 185-186.

examine the ways in which the Christian community in Enlightenment England tackled the issues of prison and prisoners—with a particular focus on the work of Elizabeth Fry. The result over time has transformed institutions in England and elsewhere, with new norms established for human behavior regarding imprisonment. Their influence is felt to this day; so also the need for their on-going witness, as attitudes and practices they challenged continually reassert themselves.⁵

Mr. Shute and the SPCK: “A Bible to Every Chamber”

The seventeenth century was a time of great change in European culture. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation and the religious wars that ensued, England was searching for new grounding of belief and morality upon which all could agree. For Protestants the institutional church no longer provided that grounding. They looked to the Bible for authority, but the Bible was open to so many interpretations that they splintered into more and more factions. Since all assumptions about the nature of things went up for grabs “the authority for a belief in a revelation at all necessarily came into question.”⁶ Christian piety waned, along with regard for religious learning and traditional guidelines for ethical behavior. Vice was perceived as increasing to alarming levels. A causal relationship was perceived between the prevalence of immoral behavior and the lack of religious education. Regardless of whether morality and Christian education were

⁵Three examples are: the death penalty, extended solitary confinement, and the practice of torture to extract confessions or information.

⁶W. O. B. Allen and Edmund McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of The Society of Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698-1898* (London, England: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1898), 1.

significantly less during the seventeenth century than during other centuries, concern for these factors motivated the formation of an organization meant to address them.

In 1698 the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) was founded by five members of the Church of England: one clergyman, two lawyers, one nobleman, and “a country gentleman of some distinction.”⁷ Its agenda included the establishment of “charity schools” for children of parents who could not afford to pay for education. There was no such thing as government-funded “public education” in seventeenth century England. As a result, a high percentage of the populace, and especially of the poor, was illiterate. The rationale for the establishment of charity schools was that “the growth of vice and debauchery is greatly owing to the gross ignorance of the principles of the Christian Religion, especially among the poorer sort.”⁸

For similar reasons, English prisons were a second target of the SPCK in its formative stage. At the February 22, 1699 meeting of the Society “a lecturer at Whitechapel” identified as “Mr. Shute” reported on conditions in London prisons and proposed reforms. Whitechapel was East London and by this time a place of poverty and destitution, which may explain Mr. Shute’s involvement. It is reputed that Compton, the Anglican Bishop of London, recommended an investigation into prison conditions which led to Mr. Shute’s report.⁹ The report was the fruit of discourse with the “Ordinary”

⁷Allen and McClure, 13.

⁸Allen and McClure, 27.

⁹Edgar C.S. Gibson, *John Howard* (Boston, MA: Knight & Millet, 1902), 61.

(chaplain) of Newgate prison in London. No mention is made of prison inspection or visitation with inmates. The report begins by listing six “Vices and Immoralities”¹⁰:

1. Personal lewdness of the Keepers and under Officers themselves who often make it their business to corrupt the prisoners, especially the Women.
2. Their confederacy with Prisoners in their vices, allowing the men to keep company with the women for money.
3. The unlimited use of Wine, Brandy, and other Strong Liquors...
4. Swearing, Cursing, Blaspheming, and Gameing.
5. Old Criminals corrupting New-comers.
6. Neglect of all Religious worships.

This list is followed by an outline of proposed reforms to correct each “vice and immorality.” Together they offer a glimpse into the way things were in English prisons of the seventeenth century.

Corruption was rife among prison staff. Inmate consumption of alcoholic beverages was commonplace, as was gambling and all manner of coarse language. Prostitution was facilitated by staff; female prisoners were regularly used as sexual objects by both inmates and staff. Men and women, juvenile delinquents and seasoned criminals, debtors and murderers—all lived together in the same cramped, shared space.

The strategies Mr. Shute proposed for addressing prison conditions were varied. They included political action (“procure an Act of Parliament”¹¹), networking (appeal to the mayor and sheriffs of London “to use their authority for reforming the Prisons”¹²), mobilization of the faith community (“all good people may be advertised of their abodes and Professions by some publick notice in the Sessions Paper, and exhorted to help

¹⁰Allen and McClure, 54

¹¹Allen and McClure, 54

¹²Allen and McClure, 54

them...’’¹³), and religious education (“books of devotion be given to all Prisoners’’¹⁴).

Only the last means was effected by the SPCK, but the others would come into use by future reformers.

Mr. Shute’s proposals for reform ranged from enforcement of standards for prison personnel to elimination of alcohol and prostitution for inmates. He proposed separate cells for inmates, and if this was not possible at least separate “apartments” for men and women. Mr. Shute also called for the separation of “New-comers” from those who today are called “hardened criminals” (he called them “Old and Incurable”). A series of proposals were put forth to rectify the “miserably neglected” religious worship in most prisons.¹⁵

The proposal which was most evidently acted upon was the distribution of religious literature, including “a Bible to every Chamber.” The Society began publishing religious tracts to benefit the spiritual life of prisoners. Its work of encouraging members to visit the sick, poor, and imprisoned both motivated and resourced Christian ministry in prisons for years to come. At Oxford, a small group of Anglicans embraced this mission of the SPCK.

The Methodists: “Preach Faith”

At the turn of the eighteenth century Samuel Wesley corresponded with the SPCK about the founding of a local society in his Epworth parish and became a member for the

¹³Allen and McClure, 56

¹⁴Allen and McClure, 57

¹⁵Allen and McClure, 57

remainder of his life. So it is not surprising that his son John took along literature from the SPCK when he went to evangelize native Americans in Georgia.¹⁶ The mission was a failure and in the years to come neither John nor his brother Charles appear on SPCK membership roles—not so much because of the failed mission, but because their “religious enthusiasm” was found objectionable by the Society. Nevertheless, they and their compatriots at Oxford clearly were influenced by SPCK ideals and practices.

The seedbed of the Methodist movement included ministry with incarcerated persons. They formed a society along the lines of the SPCK local groups with a handful of members. One of them, William Morgan, “suggested repeatedly to John that the group visit the debtors and condemned felons in the Castle prison”¹⁷ located “on the western outskirts of Oxford.”¹⁸ On August 24, 1730 John and Charles joined William in visitation there. The experience resulted in agreement that the group would schedule at least weekly visits to the prison. Before the end of the year they also began to visit the Oxford city jail—called “Bocardo”—where two centuries earlier the Protestant martyr Thomas Cramner had been imprisoned for seventeen months.¹⁹ In Wesley’s day Bocardo was a holding pen for debtors rather than for religious dissidents.

¹⁶Wesley’s correspondence with the SPCK reveals the euro-centric bias that would be typical of Christian missionaries to native peoples in the American, Asian and African continents, along with outlining what would become standard missionary practice. See pages 390-391 of *Two Hundred Years: The History of The Society of Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698-1898* for an illuminating letter of complaint.

¹⁷ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 40.

¹⁸ Frank Baker, Ed. *The Works of John Wesley: Letters I, 1721-1739*, vol. 25 (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1980), 259.

¹⁹ The trial began on September 12, 1555 and culminated with Cramner being burned at the stake the following spring.

John concluded a letter to his father on Dec. 11, 1730 with a paragraph describing the Methodists new venue for ministry. He wrote about their fundraising efforts to secure bail for individual prisoners, and their prayers and preaching at the Castle. He concludes with this: “I had almost forgot to tell you that on Tuesday night Mr. Morgan opened the way for us into Bocardo.”²⁰ The schedule John Wesley penned in the front of his diary for the new year included visits to Bocardo on Monday and Friday, and to the Castle on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. For the next four and a half years Wesley preached at the Castle at least once a month.²¹

By the end of the decade John Wesley had located in Bristol. He developed a charismatic rhetorical style that attracted huge crowds and provoked intense emotional response. He had been in Bristol less than a month when he preached at “the Newgate Gaol...a favourite haunt that was open to all comers”²² (that is, not just to the incarcerated). Wesley records the impact of his preaching:

One, and another, and another, sunk to the earth. You might see them, dropping on all sides as thunderstruck. One cried aloud. I went and prayed over her, and she received joy in the Holy Ghost. A second falling into the same agony, we turned to her, and received for her also the promise of the Father.”²³

Following the example of the SPCK, Wesley published tracts to resource the expanding Methodist movement. Topics included calls to repentance for persons engaging in various vices and criminal behaviors such as drunkenness, prostitution and smuggling, as well as

²⁰ Baker, 259.

²¹ Heitzenrater, 42.

²² Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 71.

²³ Quoted in Tomkins, *Biography*, 72.

A Word to a Condemned Malefactor. The tracts, like the sermons, were forceful calls to repentance, especially among those condemned to death.

Many crimes, including forgery and theft, were punishable by death. The frequent public executions attracted rowdy crowds who came for sport. The initial attitude of both John and Charles toward deathbed conversions was negative because of the importance they placed on virtuous deeds, and skepticism about last minute repentance. That changed in the wake of John's failed mission to Georgia when they engaged in extended theological discussion with Peter Bohler, a Moravian missionary.

On March 5, 1738 John accepted Bohler's observation that he lacked "saving faith"—faith beyond intellectual assent and works righteousness. He despaired of preaching again. To the contrary, Bohler counseled him to "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." The very next day Wesley was able to act on his mentor's counsel in the context of his prison ministry. Meeting with a condemned man in the Castle prison of Oxford, for the first time he offered someone salvation by faith alone."²⁴ It was a pivotal event for John Wesley, for the Methodist movement, and perhaps for the condemned man as well.

In the coming years, as Tomkins reports, "Charles and John continued to carry on an extensive ministry to the prisons, especially Newgate and the Marshalsea in London, the Castle in Oxford, and Newgate in Bristol."²⁵ Visitation sometimes necessitated perseverance to overcome the opposition of prison officials and competition with other clerics. During the winter of 1743, Charles wrote in his journal about conflict with a

²⁴ Tomkins, 58.

²⁵ Heitzenrater, 125.

“head-jailer” at Newgate prison (London) who repeatedly attempted to thwart Charles’ visits. He also expressed resentment at receiving less privilege than a visiting Catholic priest. This same series of journal entries²⁶ describe meaningful details of his visits which illustrate the focus, purpose and passion undergirding Methodist prison ministry.

Persons condemned to death were the primary focus of their work. Writing in his journal, Charles said:

I visited the condemned malefactors in Newgate, and was locked in by the turnkey, not with them, but in the yard. However, I stood upon a bench, and they climbed up to the windows of their cells; so that all could hear my exhortation and prayer.

Spiritual peace was their goal:

I found the poor souls turned out of the way by Mr. Broughton. He told them, "There was no knowing our sins forgiven; and, if any could expect it, not such wretches as they, but the good people, who had done so and so. As for his part, he had it not himself; therefore it was plain they could not receive it." I spoke strong words to one of them, which the Lord applied, and prayed in fervent faith. I heard the Ordinary read prayers and preach; then spake with them all together in the chapel. All, but one, were brought back to the truth.

The salvation of souls was their passion:

I prayed with the malefactors, and felt great pity for them... Again Townsend refused me admittance; telling me I had forged my order from the Sheriff. Another let me in, with Mr. Piers and Bray. Scarce were we entered the cells, when the power of God fell upon us, first as a spirit of contrition, then of strong faith, and power to exhort and pray.

This was an age when “the everlasting physical torture of damnation and the need to be saved from it were utterly solid realities for ordinary people.”²⁷ Assurance of salvation from such a dreadful fate for those to whom it seemed well sealed was a gift of far greater

²⁶ Excerpted in the Appendix. See <http://wesley.nnu.edu/charles-wesley/the-journal-of-charles-wesley-1707-1788/the-journal-of-charles-wesley-january-2-february-27-1743/> (May 23, 2013).

²⁷ Tomkins, 74.

value than contemporary people would likely appreciate. The early Methodists devoted their lives to saving people from fear of hell after death. John Howard came along later in the century to address the need to save people from hell on earth.

John Howard: “The Distress of Prisoners”

Late in life John Wesley met John Howard in Dublin, Ireland and noted in his diary these reflections: “I had the pleasure of a conversation with Mr. Howard, I think one of the greatest men in Europe. Nothing but the mighty power of God can enable him to go through his difficult and dangerous employment.”²⁸ Two years later Wesley wrote: “Mr. Howard is really an extraordinary man; God has raised him up to be a blessing to many nations.”²⁹ A life-long Anglican, Howard worked for prison reform in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was this work that so impressed Wesley.

John Howard was the son of a wealthy upholsterer from London who owned a country estate. He lived the comfortable life of a country gentleman, managing his property, sightseeing in Continental cities and vacationing in English resorts. He married twice; both marriages were happy but short-lived as his wives died. Like his father he was a life-long Dissenter or Congregationalist, a descendant of Puritans. While committed to this faith tradition and an evangelical perspective, he was a flexible and tolerant Christian who regularly joined his second wife in worship at her Anglican church and was supportive of the parish. He maintained a rhythm of Bible reading and prayer for private devotions and chastised himself for neglecting his spiritual disciplines. Howard

²⁸ John Wesley, June 21, 1787 journal entry as quoted in Gibson, 162.

²⁹ Letter from John Wesley to his brother Charles dated June 20, 1789 as quoted in Gibson, 162-163.

was a man of integrity who desired to behave in ways becoming a disciple of Christ, “whose mind should be formed in my soul.”³⁰

He was also a man of compassion. Howard visited those of meager means and treated them with kind attention. He conversed pleasantly with his tenants as well as other poor people in his community. He helped them find employment, provided schools for their children, and constructed new homes so they would have healthy places to live:

He was a sanitary reformer and an educationalist, in days when neither sanitary reform nor education were of much account. The village of Cardington lies low, and many of the cottages on his estate were damp and unhealthy. Accordingly, new and improved ones were erected, each with a small garden attached.³¹

That these new homes were rented at the same rate as before their rehabilitation testifies to Howard’s sense of justice in addition to his compassion.

Howard’s efforts on behalf of the poor impressed his affluent neighbor Mr. Samuel Whitbread, the lord of the manor at Cardington, who then collaborated with him in these good works. A contemporary described their accomplishment: “Cardington, which seemed at one time to contain the abodes of poverty and wretchedness, soon became one of the neatest villages in the kingdom.”³² In years to come Howard would demonstrate the depth of his compassion and exhort others to exhibit the same. His work for prison reform would be rooted in strong Christian conviction that “we are required to imitate our gracious Heavenly Parent, who is ‘*kind to the unthankful and the evil.*’”³³

³⁰ Gibson, 21.

³¹ Gibson, 17-18.

³² Quoted in Gibson, 19.

³³ John Howard, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales, with Preliminary Observations, and an Account of Some Foreign Prisons* (London, England: William Eyres, 1777), 23.

Two experiences of Howard's life before beginning the vocation which made him famous are worthy of mention for they likely informed that calling. Both occurred in his thirtieth year. Shortly after the death of his first wife he travelled to Portugal to tour the country and visit the scene of the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755. His plans were thwarted when a French privateer captured his boat. He was held captive for two months, experiencing first-hand the suffering of imprisonment. A note in his book written some twenty years later on *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* reflects on this experience: "Perhaps what I suffered on this occasion increased my sympathy with the unhappy people whose case is the subject of this book."³⁴

About this same time Howard was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. His contributions to the work of the Society were limited. Nevertheless, they demonstrated a delight in scientific study, ability to engage in objective observation, attention to detail, and an aptitude for statistical collection and analysis. These gifts would be well used in the service of prison reform, a vocation which began for John Howard sixteen years later at the age of 46.

In 1773 Howard was appointed High Sheriff of the County of Bedford. In that capacity he became aware of the absurd, ironic injustice of the English criminal justice system. Rather than accept the status quo, he began a personal crusade which lasted until his death seventeen years later. In his own words, Howard describes the event that launched his memorable vocation:

The distress of prisoners, of which there are few who have not some imperfect idea, came more immediately under my notice when I was Sheriff of the county of Bedford; and the circumstance which excited me

³⁴ Howard, 23.

to activity in their behalf was, the seeing some, who by the verdict of juries were declared *not guilty*; some, on whom the grand jury did not find such an appearance of guilt as subjected them to trial; and some, whose prosecutors did not appear against them; after having been confined for months, dragged back to gaol, and locked up again till they should pay *sundry fees* to the gaoler, the clerk of assize, etc.³⁵

To correct this absurdity Howard proposed to court authorities that a salary be given the jailer in lieu of being collected from inmates. The judge was receptive but requested a precedent to justify a new county expense. So Howard checked out the situation in neighboring counties. To his dismay he discovered the universality of this unjust practice, and “looking into the prisons, I beheld scenes of calamity, which I grew daily more and more anxious to alleviate.”³⁶ He had a new calling.

In order to understand the scope and depth of the problem Howard then visited, examined, studied, analyzed, and documented conditions in the various institutions of incarceration on the British Isles: “the Town-Gaols and County-Gaols, the debtors prisons and dungeons, the Bridewells and Houses of Correction.” In addition to all the shortcomings noted in Shute’s report at the turn of the century, and a host of corrupt and corrupting practices perpetuated by the system, Howard discovered and subsequently brought to light horrendous living conditions. These were summarized for an American audience in 1833 by Mrs. John Farrar:

The English prisons were, for the most part, too small for the numbers they contained; they were therefore crowded, and as the windows were very few and very small, the prisoners wanted air as well as room. They were not made secure by being well built, or by having proper walls around them, or proper guards; therefore the prisoners were loaded with irons, to prevent their making their escape. Damp, unwholesome dungeons,

³⁵ Howard, 1.

³⁶ Howard, 2.

many feet under ground, were used as sleeping apartments, and in many places no bed-stead or bedding of any kind was allowed; not even straw was furnished; the damp earth was all the poor creatures had to lie on. Very often the prisons and yards were without any drains or sewers to carry off their moisture and filth, and without any wells or pumps within the walls; and so offensive were the cells, dungeons, and even upper apartments of such buildings, that the bad air produced a fever peculiar to prisons, and known by the name of the gaol-fever. This frequently carried off more prisoners in a year than were condemned to death by the law. It spread as rapidly as the yellow fever and was often as fatal.³⁷

When this “gaol-fever” spread from the prison into the courtroom and beyond, the public began to pay attention to the need for reform.

John Howard’s prison visits expanded from England and Wales to Scotland and Ireland. He continued his investigations on the continent, ultimately visiting nearly all the countries of Europe. His goal in visiting these foreign prisons was not primarily to expose abuse; his attitude was one of inquiry rather than condemnation. Consequently, he was rarely denied entrance (the Bastille in Paris being a notable exception). He was searching for ideas to improve things at home before publically disclosing “the horrible state of things which existed in almost every gaol in the kingdom.”³⁸ He commented on the good that he found in people and places. He intentionally looked for light in the darkness, for God in the midst of hell, which is probably how a man with such a tender heart could sustain the face-to-face encounter with human suffering he endured again and again.

In 1774 Howard addressed the House of Commons. The result was passage of an Act of Parliament to “effect the reform in the matter of fees which Howard so earnestly

³⁷ Mrs. John Farrar, *John Howard*, Vol. I, in series *Lives of Philanthropists*, edited by Henry Ware, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Brown, Shattuck, and Company, 1833), 57.

³⁸ Gibson, 50.

desired”³⁹ and a second Act to improve living conditions for the sake of prisoners’ health. The passage of laws was an important step, though their significance was more symbolic than pragmatic. Methods of enforcement were not put in place and the new laws were frequently ignored. The failure to provide for routine inspection by civil authorities guaranteed that no systemic change would be effected. Hence, when Elizabeth Fry entered the common room at Newgate prison she faced the same dreadful setting that Howard had documented. She reinvigorated efforts to reform the system, articulated humane principles of crime prevention, paved the way for women’s involvement in public life, and alleviated the suffering of countless individuals.

Elizabeth Fry: “Redeeming the Time”

Betsy Gurney was born into a large Quaker family of Norwich, England in 1780. Her father, John Gurney, was a rich man whose wealth came from banking as well as the cloth trade that had made Norwich prosperous. Both of her parents were members of the Society of Friends. Her mother, Catherine Bell, brought no dowry to the marriage as her family was poor, but she did bring the status accompanying impressive family relations. Her great-grandfather was the Scotsman, Robert Barclay. Barclay was a theological heavyweight whose writings supported the work of George Fox, founder of the Friends.

Since the founding days of Fox in the mid-seventeenth century there had been a division among the Friends. Those who adhered to strict norms of dress, language and social behavior were called “plain” Quakers. Those who shed outer signs of religious identity and appropriated norms of the larger culture were called “gay” Quakers. A

³⁹ Gibson, 45.

related category of division was between those influenced by deist theology who maintained Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and rationalism over against those who were “enthusiastic” in their faith.⁴⁰ The extended Fry family included both sides of the divide, but her immediate family were decidedly gay and enlightened. Nevertheless, Christian practices of regular worship, Bible reading, and visiting the poor were part of Betsy’s upbringing.

Growing up in the midst of such competing influences, Betsy struggled in her youth to find her own identity. As the daughter of a wealthy gay Quaker, she was expected to participate in high society and practice religious faith with cool detachment. This was not her style. She was more like the Methodists than the Anglicans. She longed for personal experience of the divine and for assurance of God’s presence and approval. She bolstered her confidence to act with supplications such as, “Be with me, O Lord! Then I need not fear what any man or any power can do unto me.”⁴¹

The struggle was complicated by gender expectations. As a young woman she was expected to marry, bear children, manage domestic life and eschew public work. But she had a strong sense of calling to work outside the home as well as to public speaking. She donned the cap that symbolized plain Quakerism and entered adulthood with a passionate drive to follow the will of God for her life regardless of how uncomfortable

⁴⁰ Jean Hatton, *Betsy: The Dramatic Biography of Prison Reformer Elizabeth Fry* (Oxford, U.K.: Monarch Books, 2005), 22. Jean Hatton defines “enthusiasts” as “Christians who were not only openly committed to their faith, but who talked about God as if they had a personal acquaintance with him, preached loudly about it in public and encouraged the conversion of others.”

⁴¹ Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell, eds., *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry with Extracts From Her Journal and Letters* (Philadelphia, PA: J.W. Moore, 1847), 223. Journal entry for January 21, 1813.

and unconventional the journey might be. Before she was twenty she had established a school for the children of poor families and spoken at Monthly Meeting.

That drive sustained Elizabeth Fry through ill health, family conflict, financial disaster, social critique, and nearly a dozen pregnancies as she endeavored to reform British prisons and the criminal justice system. To promote her goals she travelled extensively in Great Britain and continental Europe where she visited prisons, organized visitation groups, preached and networked on behalf of prison reform. She spoke to thousands conveying her message of compassion and reform. She met with dukes and duchesses, kings and queens, moving “among the rich and powerful with as much ease as she moved among the prisoners of Newgate.”⁴² She mobilized family and social connections to raise funds for charitable work and wield political influence for changing laws.

Along with attending to what happened inside the prison, Elizabeth Fry also considered the causes of crime as well as the restoration of persons to the community after imprisonment. The goal was “to deter and reclaim the offender.”⁴³ She argued that “the prevention of crime will never be effected by the influence of fear alone,”⁴⁴ pointing to poverty, ignorance, and lack of legal options for employment as common culprits. In reporting on improvements at Newgate prison, *The Fourth Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline* (1822) credits “the Ladies’ Association” (organized and led by Elizabeth) with the result that “there have been many

⁴² Hatton, 176.

⁴³ “The Fourth Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders” (London, England: T. Bensley, 1822), 14.

⁴⁴ Fourth Report, 16.

encouraging instances of females, who, on their liberation, have fully proven that the kindness which they have experienced has not been lost, nor the instruction which has been imparted to them been forgotten.”⁴⁵

Elizabeth Fry established procedures that would rival the Methodists in their attention to detail and accountability, as testified to in this portion of the men’s report:

For the last twenty months, the Ladies have kept an account of the number of convicted women, who on being placed under their care, were found to have received some degree of education. From this useful register it appears that of 119 prisoners—being the whole number who were able to read—not one had attended a school of the British system...”

In 1827, at age 47, Fry published her own report. It was a book of *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners*. Only a reading of the full document will provide an appreciation of her attention to process and her guiding principles, but chapter titles give an indication of the scope of her work:⁴⁶

- Chapter I: Introductory Remarks [in which she makes the case for women to be active in public good works both as volunteers and as professionals]
- Chapter II: On the Formation of Ladies’ Committees for Visiting and Superintending Females in Prison
- Chapter III: On the Method of Proceeding in a Prison, After the Formation of a Visiting Committee, and on the Proper Department of the Visitors [sic]
- Chapter IV: On Female Officers in Prisons
- Chapter V: On Separate Prisons for Females, and on Inspection and Classification
- Chapter VI: On Instruction [academic, pragmatic and religious]
- Chapter VII: On Employment
- Chapter VIII: On Medical Attendance, Diet, Clothing and Bedding, and Firing [provision for fuel to allow fires during winter for heat]
- Chapter IX: On the Attention Required by Female Criminal on Their Leaving Prison

⁴⁵ Fourth Report, 42.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London, England: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), from the Table of Contents.

Chapter X: Conclusion [advocacy for visitation, purposes of imprisonment, objections to capital punishment and public executions]

By writing such a book, Elizabeth Fry not only worked for prison reform, but also addressed issues of women's rights.

Fry also advanced the status and role of women in more direct ways. She organized women's groups wherever she went and advocated for women to be given institutional leadership. She encouraged women to be active outside the home for the good of society. She focused on improving the conditions of incarcerated women, to teach them and give them useful employment, ignoring discouragement of authorities and even other reformers who insisted these women were "unteachable."⁴⁷ Fry's work had impact on men as well. This was particularly the case when she moved beyond a focus on conditions to structural change. For example, she worked for systemic change to abolish the death penalty.

Fry's drive was fueled by words she took to heart from mentors she had in her youth. The American Quaker William Savery convinced her at a young age: "There are no lives so unlovely, none so unworthy or so lost, that they are beyond the reach of God's transforming light." Deborah Darby, an English Quaker minister who had travelled to America, laid out the promise and the prophecy which guided the young Betsy's future: "God will visit us all, God who is father to the fatherless and mother to the motherless. You are sick of the world, so you look higher, and you who are to be dedicated to God,

⁴⁷ Hatton, 176.

will have peace in this world and glory everlasting in the world to come . . . a light to the blind, speech to the dumb and feet to the lame.”⁴⁸

Eighteen-year-old Betsy decided to act on her convictions by “getting together some of the poor children of the district on Sunday evenings and reading Bible stories to them.”⁴⁹ She began with Billy, teaching in the attic of her home, Earlham Hall in Norwich. She planned to increase her student body one by one, but boys and girls came by the dozens until they outgrew their space and moved to the laundry. Before long Betsy had a class of seventy boys and girls: “the wild, unruly, unwashed children of what were called the lower classes.”⁵⁰ She affectionately called them her “schollers.” Her sisters, impressed that their sibling should be such a successful teacher given that she herself was a mediocre student, called them “Betsy’s Imps.” Betsy grieved when marriage took her away from her home and her laundry-room school. It is not surprising that her vocation as a prison reformer began with establishing a classroom for the children of incarcerated women.

It happened like this. Stephen Grellet, raised in France as a Roman Catholic, was converted to Quakerism in America by Elizabeth’s mentor, Deborah Darby. In 1813 he came to England and visited Newgate prison with two other Quakers. What he saw there distressed him greatly, particularly the women’s section:

The gaoler endeavoured to prevent my going there, representing them as so unruly and desperate a set that they would surely do me some mischief; he had endeavoured in vain to reduce them to order, and said he could not

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hatton, 89-90.

⁴⁹ Patrick Pringle, *The Prisoner’s Friend: The Story of Elizabeth Fry* (New York, NY: Roy Publishers, 1954), 46.

⁵⁰ Pringle, 47.

be responsible for what they might do to me, concluding that the very least I might expect was to have my clothes torn off . . . When I first entered, the foulness of the air was almost insupportable; and everything that is base and depraved was so strongly depicted on the faces of the women who stood crowded before me with looks of effrontery, boldness and wantonness of expression that for a while my soul was greatly dismayed . . . On going up [to the infirmary] I was astonished beyond description at the mass of woe and misery I beheld. I found many very sick, lying on the bare floor or on some old straw, having very scanty covering over them, though it was cold. There were several children, born in the prison among them, almost naked.”⁵¹

Upon leaving this “abode of wretchedness” Mr. Grellet went directly to the home of Elizabeth Fry and unburdened his soul about what he had just witnessed, pleading that something be done for the children.

She responded by purchasing flannel, recruiting seamstress help, and taking a bundle of clothes for children on the very next day with her friend Anna Buxton. They, too, were discouraged from entering the women’s area. They persisted and found things as described by Mr. Grellet with nearly three hundred women and many children indiscriminately confined in space designed for less than half that number. The women were dressed in filthy rags, cussing and drinking, receiving their guests with “sneers and defiance.”⁵²

Elizabeth and Anna gave out the clothing for the children, returning two more times to visit, pray and distribute clothes. As they knelt and prayed the women joined them. Elizabeth concluded from these three visits that prison reform “was not only necessary but also possible.”⁵³ However, it would be four years before she would be able

⁵¹ Pringle, 72-73.

⁵² Pringle, 75.

⁵³ Pringle, 75.

to begin her vocation in earnest. In the meantime, she coped with illness, gave birth to her ninth and tenth children, and buried her five-year-old daughter.

In January 1817, at age thirty-seven, Elizabeth Fry returned, alone, to Newgate. Contemporary biographer Jean Hatton describes what happened. Initially the “turnkey” (guard) would not let her in the women’s quarters but her will prevailed and she entered by herself. The door was locked behind her. At first there was silence and then derisive laughter, cussing, and a tangible sense of threat. After “silently pleading for help” she noticed a young woman holding a little girl. Then . . .

. . . taking the child in her own arms, and laying a hand on the young mother’s shoulder, Betsy faced the crowd, “Is there not something we can do for these innocent little children,” she asked, “are they to learn to become thieves and worse?”⁵⁴

She won the cooperation of the women by gently appealing to their roles as mothers. She shared her own experience and her Christian faith:

Pressed upon by their foul-smelling and sweating bodies, and touched by their rags crawling with lice, Betsy told the women that she too was a mother, whose pain when her little daughter died had finally been eased by faith. Presently she spoke of God’s passion for sinners and recounted the parable of the vineyard . . . “Jesus,” Betsy said, “came especially to save sinners like us.” A young woman looked up curiously. “Who is he, madam?” she asked.

After gaining permission from authorities (granted only because they were sure she would fail), Fry identified space in the prison for a classroom. She then recruited an educated inmate to teach and proved to all that reform was, indeed, possible.

From that time on Elizabeth Fry dedicated her life to caring for the needs of people who were incarcerated. This included basic physical needs—the “outward

⁵⁴ Hatton, 172.

necessities”⁵⁵ like clothing, heat, food, air, bedding, and sanitation. She addressed their emotional and spiritual needs, as illustrated by her visit to Newgate described above.

These were closely connected with concerns for intellectual development:

They ought to be taught to read, write, and cipher, as well as to make a ready and profitable use of the needle...it is most desirable to turn the channel of their thoughts, to improve not only their habits, but their tastes, and, by every possible means, to raise their intellectual and moral, as well as their religious, standard.

She advocated they receive basic education in literate culture skills.

Convinced at the core that no human is beyond redemption, and that society needs to reclaim its wayward citizens rather than to vilify them, Elizabeth Fry was a powerful advocate for reform rather than punishment, for discipline rather than contempt, and for correction rather than revenge. She was not naïve about the effects of crime, nor the propensity of humans to err, so she understood the need for institutions of incarceration. But her approach was one of mercy, not judgment. A letter to her sister captures her spirit as she began her ministry in earnest:

I have lately been much occupied in forming a school in Newgate, for the children of the poor prisoners, as well as the young criminals, which has brought much peace and satisfaction with it; but my mind has also been deeply affected in attending a poor woman who was executed this morning . . . This poor creature murdered her baby; and how inexpressibly awful to have her life taken away! The whole affair has been truly afflicting to me; to see what poor mortals may be driven to, through sin and transgression, and how hard the heart becomes, even to the most tender affections. How should we watch and pray, that we fall not by little and little, and become hardened, and commit greater sins. I had to pray for these poor sinners this morning, and also for the preservation of our household from the evil there is in the world.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Fry and Cresswell, 225.

⁵⁶ Extract from letter to her sister, Rachel Gurney, March 24, 1817 quoted in Fry and Cresswell, 279.

This work blessed Elizabeth Fry's own life as well as many others. For as challenging, unconventional, and risky as such work was in those days, she was clearly energized by it. It gave her a sense of fulfillment, well-being, and great satisfaction.

Elizabeth Fry understood herself as, in John Wesley's words, "a sinner saved by grace." Aware of her own shortcomings and sins, her own need to pray and read the Bible, and the forces which lead people to wrong-doing, she related to even the most shameful prisoners with humility and respect. This is the reason for the "miraculous effects" that John Randolph observed with such incredulity. The pervasive hope she carried for each incarcerated person was that their prison time would be redemptive. It was the same hope she had for herself and all Christians:

Earnestly it is to be desired that the number of these valuable labourers in the cause of virtue and humanity may be increased, and that all of us may be made sensible of the infinite importance of redeeming the time, of turning our talents to account, and of becoming the faithful, humble, devoted, followers of a crucified Lord, who went about DOING GOOD.⁵⁷

Like her predecessors—Mr. Shute, John and Charles Wesley, John Howard—Elizabeth Fry did "redeem the time" given for her life, doing extraordinary works "worthy the attention of angels." Her work provides a solid foundation for the "Breath of Fresh Air" project. Her spirit inspires courage and conviction to carry it out.

⁵⁷ Fry, 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

A simple song learned at the 2012 Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers precedes a biblical storytelling in Circle of the Word. These are its lyrics:

Listen to the Word that God has spoken;
Listen even if you don't understand;
Listen to the voice that began creation;
Listen to the one who is close at hand.¹

Following a telling of scripture in a worship service at Grace the storyteller pronounces, “This is the Word of God for the people of God.” Reference to “the Word” is so common in Christian communities that its meaning is unexamined and under-appreciated, though at some level it always seems to refer to something profoundly significant.

But what exactly? What is really being claimed in the song and in the pronouncement? Exploration of the sources, meanings, and associations of the term “Word of God” in Christian thought and practice uncovers a long and complex history, the conclusion of which is that there is no “exactly” about it. The meaning is almost always ambiguous. Nevertheless, an examination of this history illuminates the potential significance of the biblical storytelling event and why it is appropriate to surround it with references to “the Word of God.”

¹ “Listen to the Word That God Has Spoken” (adapted), #455 in *Glory to God: the Presbyterian Hymnal*, ed. David Eicher (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2013), Hymnary.org., accessed February 15, 2015, http://www.hymnary.org/text/listen_to_the_word_which_god_has_spoken.

What is the Word of God?

Survey people on what they think of when they hear the phrase “Word of God” and the responses are quite varied. Incarcerated men in a year-long interfaith program had these associations: righteousness, enlightenment, wisdom, love, hope, Jesus, faith, way of life, intimate conversations, guidance, searching. The director of their program gave this response: part of God revealed. A woman inmate at a state prison responded, “The Bible.”

Church and community members interested in prison ministry shared their understanding: the Bible, scripture from the Holy Bible, what God conveys to us with written words. One person offered a list: (1) The Christ (Jesus); (2) God's Spirit within the scripture writers; (3) The read or spoken scripture; (4) God's self-expression; (5) Creator of the world; (6) Giver of light and life; (7) Truth. And another combined many of the referents into one cohesive statement: “The Word of God created the world and put his Word in the Bible to teach us what to do.” These varied responses reflect the complexity of the concept Word of God as used throughout Christian history.

Each response is in continuity with one or another aspect of the faith tradition. A survey of Christian thought also results in a variety of associations. Trying to follow the line of thought of any given writer is difficult, especially if their writing is taken out of context, because it is often unclear what they are referring to by the phrase “Word of God.” Is it the Bible? God? Jesus? Preaching? Efforts to identify the various meanings have been made by both Protestants and Roman Catholics reflecting on this concept in the past century. It is not an easy task, as attested by Walter Ong: “

Any understanding of the word of God as word must of course take cognizance of the fact that word of God is used in a number of senses within the Hebrew and the

Christian tradition, senses not any the less bewildering because of the fact that all of them are related to one another.”²

A survey of the history of this important concept confirms Ong’s statement.

Twentieth century Protestant theology was deeply influenced by Karl Barth’s “Neo-Orthodox” systematic treatment of what he termed the “threefold form” of the Word of God: the Word of God as preached, written, and revealed. The over-arching concept to guide Barth’s work on Word of God was revelation. He links his understanding to the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Barth, the Word of God, like the Trinity, has a unity such that “we should never regard any of the three forms of the Word of God in isolation.” He describes the relationship of the three forms of the Word of God to one another as intertwined and as an “analogy” for the “three-in-oneness” of God: “In the facts that for revelation, Scripture, and proclamation we can substitute the divine “Person”-names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and *vice versa*...”³ Because Barth uses preaching and proclamation synonymously, he elevates preaching to a prominent position, part of the Trinity. Interesting, then, that none of the responses from an informal survey of associations with the Word of God include preaching. Apparently that is not how most people today experience God’s Word.

Writing later in the mid-twentieth century, Paul Tillich sorts out six meanings for the “symbol” Word of God. Tillich’s perspective is Protestant as well, grounded in existential philosophy. He also places his discussion of God’s Word in the category of revelation, entitling that chapter, “The Reality of Revelation,” summing up his six

² Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 182.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 136.

meanings in one: “God manifest.” Tillich’s list begins with his concept of God as “the ground of being”—the source and destiny of all “forms.” Secondly, Tillich identifies the Word as the “medium” of creation, presumably as depicted in Genesis 1. He describes this approach to creation as preserving the freedom of both the created and the Creator, in contrast to a process of emanation.⁴ A third meaning Tillich identifies is “the word received by all those who are in a revelatory correlation,” which may be “subpersonal” but is not “irrational.” This meaning seems to refer to the various ways in which people have experienced divine communication throughout history, for example, as Elijah experienced God in the still, small voice on Mt. Horeb telling him to return to his people and resume his prophetic ministry with them.

Fourthly, deriving in particular from the Gospel of John, the Word of God may reference “the name for Jesus as the Christ”—that is, not the historic man, but “the being of the Christ.” Fifth, it may refer to a document called the Bible, but not as an exact equation [Word of God = Bible]; only insofar as the Bible “is the document of the final revelation; and it participates in the final revelation of which it is the document.” Tillich goes on to lament, “nothing has contributed more to the misinterpretation of the biblical doctrine of the Word than the identification of the Word with the Bible.”⁵ The sixth and last meaning of Word of God that Tillich identifies is “the message of the church as proclaimed in her preaching and teaching.” Again Tillich is quick to discourage one-to-one correspondence. This does not mean that any given sermon equates with the Word of

⁴ “Emanation” is defined by the Miriam-Webster dictionary as “the origination of the world by a series of hierarchically descending radiations from the Godhead through intermediate stages to matter.” This cosmogony was articulated in the third century C.E. by the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus.

⁵ This observation raises the ante for understanding what is meant when we conclude a scripture telling with the claim, “The Word of God...”

God. His qualifier is reminiscent of the question Barth posed regarding preaching, “Is there any Word in the words?”⁶

Entering the scene on the cusp of the digital revolution in communication technology was the Jesuit scholar, Walter Ong. In his work on the Word of God in relation to the history of communication, Ong identified eight “main centers of meaning for the term as found in the scriptures and basic church documents from antiquity to the present.”⁷ Ong uses the language of communication and presence, rather than revelation. His explication is both the most comprehensive and the most lucid of those surveyed. The first four centers of meaning derive from scriptural analysis, and the second four from historical analysis. According to Ong’s scriptural analysis, the Word of God may refer to: (1) an exercise of divine power; (2) communication from God to humans; (3) God’s communication to the prophets or others who are to speak out for God; (4) the utterance of the prophets or others speaking what God has given them to speak as from God. According to Ong’s historical analysis, the word of God may refer to: (5) what is heard by Christians in sermons; (6) God’s communication to the inspired writers of the Bible; (7) what was actually written down in the original texts of the Bible, as well as in all subsequent copies and translations of the Bible; (8) Jesus Christ, as the Second Person of the Trinity, the primary “utterance” of the Father and equally eternal.

In conclusion, there is no definitive answer to the question, “What is the Word of God?” Rather, there is a constellation of interrelated meanings. The phrase “Word of God” or simply “Word” (with a capital “W”) is a multivalent term which signifies some

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns from the 6th ed. (1933; repr., London, England: Oxford University Press, 1968), p 9.

⁷ Ong includes sources for the meanings he lists. Ong, 182-185.

mix of concepts in the mind of those using it. The ambiguity is often appropriate and even intentional. The context of its use usually helps identify whether one or another possible meanings is intended, whether God the Creator, Christ Jesus, sacred scripture, religious tradition, proclamation, or preaching. How did this mix arise, and what are some of the problems that arose with it?

The Word of God, the Bible, and Christian Identity

It is no great mystery how “Word” as a signifier and as a concept came to be associated with a variety of referents. The canon of Christian faith offers such variety. In the Psalms we have references to the healing power of the word (for example, Ps. 106) and to religious tradition which would be both oral and written—commandments, decrees, statutes, ordinances (for example, Ps. 119). The First Testament begins with an account of creation in which God spoke the cosmos and all its “multitudes” into being: “God said...and it was.” God’s word had power and efficacy.

The scriptures go on to record how individuals, beginning with Abram, experienced the word of the Lord coming to them, telling them things that invariably came to pass and calling them to work. Often they were told to go someplace, and often to a place they didn’t really want to go. Jonah is the quintessential story of this dynamic. The issue for the individual was whether or not this word was believed and then whether or not the individual did what that word commanded; if so it was “reckoned to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

The Greek scriptures record more such stories. According to Luke, Mary is a good example of an individual who heard God’s word, accepted and trusted God’s word,

believed and was blessed by God's word (Lk. 1:26-56). The Gospel of John begins with a hymn which identifies Jesus with the pre-existent God, identifying him as the "The Word." Acts recounts how Paul is called to teach and proclaim "the word of the Lord" throughout Asia Minor and on to Macedonia.

In the first few centuries of church history, writers like St. Ignatius of Antioch, Origen, and Tertullian considered The Word of God to be "like another, a new, Incarnation or the assumption of a new form by the eternal *Logos*"⁸ whose voice was heard in the Old Testament, even though he had not been visible." They use "Word" to refer to the Creator and to Christ and by a process of logical deduction, to scripture: "'Scripture is the one perfect and harmonious expression of God.' 'Therefore Scripture is to be understood in this manner, as the uniquely perfect body of the Word.'" ⁹

By the fifth century, the written document—the "Holy Book"—had become an object of great veneration. According to Linus Bopp, "In the time of St. John Chrysostom the Bible was already an object of worship in the Church..."¹⁰ This is not surprising since in its infancy Christian identity was so closely associated with "the material form of the codex."¹¹ The ascendancy of the book over the scroll for written communication was a technological innovation concurrent with, and to some extent as a result of, the rise of Christianity. As explained by Peter Horsfield and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "One of the

⁸ Linus Bopp, "The Salvific Power of the Word According to the Church Fathers" in *The Word: Readings in Theology* (New York, NY: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1964), 147.

⁹ Bopp, 148.

¹⁰ Bopp, 153.

¹¹ Peter Horsfield and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "What Is It About the Book? Semantic and Material Dimensions in the Meditation of the Word of God," *Studies in World Christianity* 17, no. 2 (2011): 181.

elements of Christianity that distinguished it from other religions of the time was not just the content of its texts but also the form in which they were reproduced.”¹² Possession of the sacred writings in codex form was associated with persecution for remaining steadfast in the faith, thereby solidifying the bond between the Bible and Christian identity.

When Constantine embraced Christianity and made it the official religion of the Roman Empire he commissioned the production of fifty official copies of the whole Christian scriptures to be placed in select churches. Up until this time, 332 C.E., what was considered sacred scripture for Christians was in flux and debatable. Constantine’s “Bible project” ended the flux and the debate, which would not re-open for another millennium. So the Word of God in its written legal—“canonical”—form was established by political authority, as well as by an ecumenical council of the church.

A second consequence of Constantine’s Bible Project was that the Bible became valued as an artifact, in and of itself, and not just for its contents. It became a matter of prestige to possess a whole Bible. To show it off it properly it would be decorated and placed on display, “adored and inspiring by its form and presence.”¹³ In a fourth century sermon¹⁴ John Chrysostom lamented about the inattention to scriptural content even by those few who invested in copies (“games and dice are in most houses; but never books, except in a few”):

I hear no one priding himself because he knows their contents, but because he possesses one written in gold letters. Now, what profit is there in this, pray? The

¹² Horsfield, 181.

¹³ Horsfield, 181.

¹⁴ Homily 32.

Scriptures were not given merely that we might have them in books, but that we might engrave them on our hearts.¹⁵

Chrysostom seems to have been an early advocate for biblical storytelling.

The significance of the biblical contents was increasingly submerged in the admiration of Bible as artifact as the process of objectification proceeded into the Middle Ages. In worship, there might be much pomp and circumstance surrounding the scripture reading, and especially around the artifact of the book, but little actual engagement by the people with the content of the scripture. Bopp describes how “In the processions of the Middle Ages...the Gospel book was borne upon a decorated bier”¹⁶ with more ceremonial dignity than even the Eucharistic elements received at that time.

This practice reflected a sacramental view of the Bible—a merging of the understanding of the Word of God with an artifact that carried words. Michelle Brown summarizes:

Logos, the Word, was the very embodiment of the Creator, revealed to Creation through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ and through the abiding physical manifestation of the Gospelbook that contained his teachings . . . That book became, literally, the Word made flesh, or rather, the Word made word.¹⁷

The Bible as an artifact was so closely associated with the Word of God that many believed it to have divine qualities and powers. Passages of scripture would be carried around the neck like an amulet.¹⁸ Such practices have continued throughout history, especially in communities that are dominated by oral modes of communication, but

¹⁵ *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies 1-47*, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, *S.C.H.* (New York, NY: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), 319.

¹⁶ Bopp, 153.

¹⁷ Paper by Michelle Brown 2007 quoted in Horsfield, 186

¹⁸ Bopp, 153.

present in any communication culture whenever the sacred value of the contents as Word of God transfers to the container—the book—as a symbol for those contents.

The shift from the Bible as a text of plural words describing, or even quoting the Word of God, to the Bible as “the collective singular concept of The Word”¹⁹ also resulted from high literate practices. Theological treatments of the text, especially allegorical and other non-literal readings, move so far from the original meaning of the “material” written words that they are no longer operative as originally intended. Horsfield and Asamoah-Gyadu contend, “For Augustine, the Bible is the word of God in material form that has immaterial qualities.”²⁰ It is these immaterial qualities that are most highly valued. The content is theologized. It may be revered as a basis for theological doctrines, but is not taken seriously as having value in its own right. The original experience reported in the scripture is ignored in favor of theological constructs.

This move runs a high risk of leaving the realm of meaning properly attributed to “the Word of God” and doing what Jesus warned against: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition” (Mark 7:8). It raises the question of authoritative source, which came to prominence in the sixteenth century. It prompts deeper reflection on the meaning of “Word of God” for the sake of understanding how one is most likely to encounter such a Word, if indeed, as is assumed here, such a Word exists and can be encountered by humans.

¹⁹ Horsfield, 189.

²⁰ Horsfield, 189.

Authoritative Source: Scripture, Tradition, Experience

Fierce arguments arose among Christians in the middle of the second millennium with regard to the authoritative source for knowing the Word of God. There were three basic contenders: scripture, tradition, and experience. By “scripture” is meant those preserved writings that were deemed canonical—now commonly referred to as the Old and New Testaments.²¹ By “tradition” is meant those practices, beliefs, and doctrines officially approved by high church officials from the days of the early church. By “experience” is meant individual personal experience of hearing God’s voice, normally with reference to the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther, a biblical scholar, initiated the arguments by insisting on the priority of scripture over tradition and claiming that all, not just ecclesial leadership, should have access to the Word of God through access to scripture. Before long, others insisted that neither scripture nor tradition was authoritative, only the inner voice of the Holy Spirit.²² Both wings of the Reform movement accused church hierarchy of “shunning” scripture in favor of tradition. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine refuted this accusation in Volume 1 of his *Controversies*:

The Prophetical [First Testament] and Apostolical [Second Testament] books according to the mind of the Catholic Church, made clear both long ago in the Third Council of Carthage and recently in the Council of Trent, are the true word of God and the certain and stable rule of faith.²³

²¹ In this paper they are called the First and Second Testaments, when not referred to as scriptures.

²² On the Continent, this approach began in a faction of the left wing of the Reformation referred to as the Spiritualists, represented by Casper Schwenckfeld and Sebastian Franck. A century later in England it was fully developed by George Fox who initiated the Quaker movement.

²³ Bellarmine, *Controversies*, Vol. 1 translation 6-7. First published at Ingolstadt in 1581-1593. This statement early in the work seems to be contradicted near its conclusion when he writes, “the chief end

Having defended the Church against false accusation, Bellarmine went on to make the case that tradition, as well as scripture, is the Word of God.

In so doing, he differentiated the two by naming the former “the written Word of God” and the latter “the unwritten Word of God.”²⁴ He spells out his argument against Luther’s maxim that “Scripture alone is necessary and sufficient for preserving the faith” and carefully articulates why tradition is also necessary. He does not grant the Holy Spirit as experienced by individuals a role in “the total rule of faith” though ultimately all is based on the final authority of God.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) emphasized the unity of scripture and tradition, taking a “both/and” approach. It also emphasized the relational aspect of revelation, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the communal fruit of God’s Word. Furthermore, it put “extraordinary stress on revelation in Christ.”²⁵ These emphases are reflected in a speech by Pope Francis soon after his election. In April of 2013 Pope Francis had this to say to members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission:

Sacred Scripture is the written testimony of the divine Word, the canonical memory that attests to the event of Revelation. However, the Word of God preceded the Bible and surpasses it. That is why the center of our faith isn’t just a book, but a salvation history and above all a person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.²⁶

of Scripture is not to be a rule of faith.” However, he will go on to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory statements by calling Scripture “a rule of faith, not total but partial.”

²⁴ Meaning, as an opponent specified, “unwritten, not because they are absolutely so, but because they were not written into the sacred books by the original authors.” William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture: Against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, 499.

²⁵ Richard J. Clifford, “The Gift of the Word: The Achievements and Challenges of Vatican II on Scripture,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly* 209 (2013): 16.

²⁶ Scott P. Richert, “Pope Francis: ‘The Word of God Precedes the Bible and Surpasses It,’” under “About.com” <http://catholicism.about.com/b/2013/04/12/pope-francis-the-word-of-god-precedes-the-bible-and-surpasses-it.htm> (accessed September 30, 2013).

In this statement the pontiff does not use the terminology of “Tradition” to broaden the scope of the Word of God. Rather, he points to Jesus, another referent for Word of God, and one bearing clear scriptural authority.

The Pope’s statements were framed by blogger Scott Richert as succinct explanations of the Catholic and Orthodox understandings of Scripture, “but rejected by most Protestant denominations.” Familiarity with the writings of Protestants from Luther to Barth, and the practices of many Protestant churches today, contradict Richert’s negative characterization of the Protestant stance. It is doubtful that Pope Francis would agree with it, either. Most branches of the Reformation, beginning with Luther, have understood the Word of God to be more than a book, in one way or another entailing “the living voice of God.”²⁷

This is not to say that the equation of the scripture with “the eternal Word of God” (meaning, God, the source and destiny of all) has not also been part of Protestant history, nor that current manifestations are absent. In fact, according to a Lutheran theologian from South Africa, Klaus Nürnberger, this equation has been around in various forms from late Judaism, to early Christianity, to Catholicism and now is “still the most fundamental article of faith for countless Christians.”²⁸ It was fully developed by “Protestant Orthodoxy”²⁹ in an attempt to “rival the scholastic sophistication and doctrinal certainty of Catholic dogmatics” and “provide a rational argument for the divine

²⁷ Klaus Nürnberger, *Martin Luther’s Message for Us Today: A Perspective from the South* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2005), 4.

²⁸ Nürnberger, 88.

²⁹ Defined by Nürnberger as “the main line Protestant theology of the 17th century,” 88. The movement is also sometimes called “Protestant Scholasticism.”

legitimacy of its doctrinal formulations in response to the emerging Enlightenment.”³⁰

This view, as described by Nürnberger claims that authority rests completely and entirely in the scriptures, which are sufficient in all respects, contain no errors, are entirely clear, and create faith. The scriptures are considered to be identical with the inspired Word of God. Other sources of authority such as oral tradition, Catholic doctrine, and episcopal office are rejected.³¹

The groundwork for this position was laid by a contemporary of Bellarmine—William Whitaker. Whitaker’s argument reflects the rising dominance of print communication and the fading prestige of orality that was occasioned by the invention of the printing press. In one instance Whitaker appeals to the pragmatic superiority of print over oral communication: “The scripture therefore is necessary *for certainty*: for those things which are taught orally have not the same firmness and certainty as those which are written and cosigned in books...”³² In another place, Whitaker makes the more audacious claim that “God does not teach us now by visions, dreams, revelations, oracles, as of old, but by the scriptures alone.”³³ Whether or not Whitaker’s familiarity with the pedagogy of God is as accurate as he claims remains a question, but he does correctly discern the direction of power with regard to communication systems in his culture.

³⁰ Nürnberger, 88.

³¹ Nürnberger, 89.

³² Whitaker, 499.

³³ Whitaker, 521.

The Deeper Meaning: Themes

A survey of the current and historical understanding, use, and debates about “Word of God” discloses five principal themes. The first is **Event**. Language about the Word of God involves the language of experience—of happening, occurrence, transaction, movement through time. “Word of God” does not refer to something static, singular, unchanging, unmoving. Hence, it is not finally a book. Nor is it a doctrine. It does not refer to pure abstraction or idealized form, nor to information or “deductions made from such ‘information.’”³⁴ It is not an “isolated bearer of meanings”³⁵; rather, it is “how we human beings experience God in this world.”³⁶ It is alive and moving through time, though the experience of it may sometimes be so strong that the effect is described as “time standing still.” There is no appropriate talking about the Word of God that does not involve the language of event, so this theme is named first.

The second theme names the nature of the event: **Revelation**. “Word of God” refers to God revealing something about God’s Self (insofar as God has a “self”), whether that something be a characteristic, an intention, a desire, a command, or a truth.³⁷ Revelation assumes communication from one to another, in this case from God to humanity. Revelation is often experienced as new insight coming from “out of the blue,” the shedding of light on a conundrum, a voice delivering a message or telling a story that makes sense of reality.

³⁴ Nürnberger, 12.

³⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1963), 313.

³⁶ Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, “The Bible as the Word of God” *Word & World* 32 (2012), 353.

³⁷ “Truth” is a dangerous term, frequently abused. It is used here to reference something accurate about reality—accurate for the context, for the time, for the situation.

The days have passed when it can be assumed that all people believe in God and in the possibility of God revealing God's Self. Revelation belongs to the sphere of faith and spiritual experience which finally is a mystery, not a thing to be scientifically proved. Those who do not embrace the possibility of revelation for their lives will not be concerned to engage the Word of God. For those who do embrace this possibility through Christian faith, revelation is experienced not as the result of human speculation about God, but as "an initiative on the part of the living God who leaves the realm of the mysterious and intervenes in human history."³⁸ This initiative is revelation.

In the First Testament "Word of God" refers to divine will as revealed in the Law, through the prophets, and in nature. In the Second Testament it also refers to the divine will as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and to the subsequent recorded work of the Holy Spirit through the community it formed. Many contemporary Christians agree that "God is still speaking"³⁹—whether the speaking is labeled "tradition," "inner voice," or "Word." Most Christians affirm that the community of the Church is vital to the understanding of God's on-going revelation.

Orality is a third theme. The means of revelatory communication is first of all oral speech. The spoken word is the most basic way in which humans communicate. Walter Ong's analysis of culture and Christianity from the perspective of communication modes corrects critical misperceptions of literate thinkers: "Today we have often to labor to regain the awareness that the word is still always at root the spoken word. Early man

³⁸ Rene Latourelle, "Revelation, History and Incarnation," in *The Word: Readings in Theology* (New York, NY: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1964), 27.

³⁹ "God is still speaking" is a campaign slogan of the United Church of Christ.

had no such problem: he felt the word, even when written, as primarily an event in sound."⁴⁰ Gerhard Eberling put it bluntly:

When the Bible speaks of God's Word, then it means here unreservedly word as word—word that as far as its word-character is concerned is completely normal, let us not hesitate to say: natural, oral word taking place between man and man. The Bible can, of course, radically contrast God's Word and man's word, but not in regard to the question of the verbal, or to put it still more sharply, spoken character of the word concerned...⁴¹

From the beginning of the scriptural witness, God is understood to have created all that exists through oral speech: God *said*...and it *was*.

Orality happens in time. It is not static and it is not replicable in exact detail. This is because time is always moving, always changing lived experience. There is no sense in trying to capture a revelatory communication. The Word of God is free to be distinct with each fresh occurrence. On the other hand, the Word of God can be recalled and re-presented with a full complement of “language” that goes beyond “vocables” to include gestures, deeds, and silence,⁴² thanks to a fourth theme.

That theme is personal **presence**. The most basic way in which humans comprehend communication, oral speech, involves one person being present with another and available for interaction. As expressed by Gerhard Ebeling, “The doctrine of the Word of God is at heart nothing else but the doctrine of God as a Person.”⁴³ This theme

⁴⁰ Ong, ix.

⁴¹ Ebeling, 325. Ebeling uses “man” to mean “people” as do most of the writers quoted in this paper, their consciousness not yet having been raised to see the harm done humanity by unthinking exclusion of women from the spoken and written record.

⁴² Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966), 13.

⁴³ Ebeling, 352.

not only allows for re-presentation, but also expands the idea of communication to involve all the senses. Abram has visions of the Lord talking to him, even visiting with him at his tent by the oaks of Mamre and there sharing a meal. The prophets, receiving the Word of God, understand God to be with them. And when they are afraid to do what God commands, God promises God's supportive, available presence.

This aspect of "God with us"—Emmanuel—is understood by Christians to be fulfilled most perfectly in Jesus. God communicates God's self—God's Word—via a person who could be heard to speak, but who also could be experienced in action through all the senses. He touched lepers and children, tasted bread and wine, and declined the smell of hyssop to ease his suffering. Marianne Sawicki describes the Christian concept of presence as intimacy:

"Jesus had celebrated a God who wished for new intimacy with men and women, and who established that astounding intimacy in Jesus. The availability of God in Jesus was quite tangible and concrete—as solid, in fact, as a friend sharing food at the dinner table."⁴⁴

This is the core meaning of the theological concept of incarnation.

Finally, there is the theme of **power**. The Word of God has creative power to effect response. Beginning with the story of Creation in Genesis 1, the First Testament attests to this power repeatedly, as well as to the "hardness of heart" that deafens the ear to hear the powerful Word of God, or that fails to trust the Word that is heard. In the Hebrew understanding, Word is connected to breath, to life, to creativity, to the ability to bring something into being or to change that which already exists.

⁴⁴ Marianne Sawicki, *The Gospel in History: Portrait of a Teaching Church, The Origins of Christian Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 84.

The Greek concept of Word—*Logos*—is different than the Hebrew one, but no less significant. As explained by Brian McLaren, “For the Greeks, the *logos* is the internal logic, pattern, or meaning of the universe.”⁴⁵ Just as Jesus redefined the prevailing Greco-Roman understanding of *kyrios* (lord) from dominance to servitude, so also did he redefine the prevailing understanding of *logos* from a pattern of hierarchical dominance where some had power over others (rich over poor, masters over slaves, men over women, for example), to a pattern generated by the power of love. As McLaren writes,

John audaciously proclaims that the true logic of the universe—the true meaning or syntax or plotline of history—has been enfleshed in Jesus and dwelt among us, full of glory, full of grace and truth, uttering one commandment only: love.⁴⁶

The Word that Jesus embodied as one who “was before”⁴⁷ all things, ordered those things according to the criteria of love, not dominance.

Tradition and history also bear witness to the power of the Word of God. When people hear the Word, things happen. People experienced the Word and changed allegiances, attitudes, vocations and lifestyles. Ways and means were created to care for the poor, tend to the marginalized, comfort the bereaved, heal the sick, school the uneducated and advocate for the imprisoned. The Word of God, rightly heard and understood, has brought on-going benefits to human community, both to persons who identify themselves as Christian and to those who do not. It is important to engage in discernment when calling something “the Word of God.” As Jesus himself noted, much

⁴⁵ Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2012), 141.

⁴⁶ McLaren, 143.

⁴⁷ John 1:15.

evil has been done by those claiming to prophesy in the Lord's name.⁴⁸ Mark Reid identified fifteen criteria for identifying the Word of God today that provide a helpful guide to discernment. His "necessary" criterion is that "The Word of God is *always creative*, never finally destructive. By its very nature it is creative and community building."⁴⁹ The power of the Word of God is the power of love at work in history.

Biblical Storytelling as Word of God

In all the discussion of Word of God there is rare mention of the practice of telling the stories of God, out loud and in person.⁵⁰ Christianity became so intimately related to literate culture at an early stage in its development, and elevated the book to such high status, that oral presentation of its sacred traditions is not on the radar of most Christian writers. Even though we now know that the early church was formed by oral delivery, we do not take seriously the difference between the experience and impact of written communication and the experience and impact of oral communication. Oral communication is sometimes valued, but not storytelling forms. Strongly influenced by the Greco-Roman culture in which it developed, Christianity prized classical rhetoric and logical argumentation over storytelling modes of thought. This is ironic since storytelling was the typical mode of thought and teaching in Jewish culture, and for Jesus and his first

⁴⁸ See the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21-23.

⁴⁹ Mark K. Reid "On Identifying the Word of God Today," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 10 (1975), 15.

⁵⁰ "Stories of God" is here used broadly to reference all biblical contents, not just the narrative genre.

followers. Even when this fact is acknowledged, its relevance for today has not been recognized.⁵¹

“Proclamation” is regularly named in connection with the Word of God, and sometimes includes oral recitation of scripture. More often, however, “proclamation” refers to speeches that are theoretically *about* scripture, or at least *based on* scripture which we call sermons, homilies, or preaching. Reading scripture aloud and preaching are called “proclamation” and are often treated as forms of the Word of God. Barth uses preaching as a synonym with proclamation, thus raising the sermon to an even higher level than it had already attained in Protestant practice. Scripture is read and the Word is preached.

Scripture had long since become a pretext for the sermon. The great evangelical preachers of the eighteenth century such as Jonathon Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitfield grounded their preaching on a single biblical verse, as had their predecessors. Where the Roman Catholic Church lifted the Eucharist to prominence—a place where God’s Word, in one of its meanings, would be experienced—Protestants reserved that place for the sermon. When “contemporary worship” styles developed in Protestantism in the late twentieth century, it sometimes dropped the scripture reading completely as a distinctive component of worship, settling for an integration of scripture in the sermon.

A recent description of what typically happens in a mainline Protestant worship service raises an important question:

⁵¹ In academia, those engaged in a new field called “Performance Literature” are working to correct this oversight; the seminar of the Network of Biblical Storytellers is another venue for exploration of this topic.

Some texts are read from the Bible, which takes up a few minute of time. These are declared to be the “Word of the Lord,” but then the preacher spends perhaps five times as long speaking. What, then, is the relationship between the Bible, the word of God, and the sermon? Does the word of God always need such extended explanation or application?⁵²

Yes, explanation of the original understanding of these ancient words is usually needed.

And yes, help with connections between the ancient and contemporary experience is usually needed. However if more attention, time and energy went into the internalization and re-presentation of the scriptures, much less would be required or even desired of the sermon.

And more actual engagement of the Word of God would likely occur. Common to all understandings of Word of God is the experience of the personal presence of God, verbal communication, and power that impacts reality. Biblical storytelling potentially draws these three components together in ways that are more likely to be true to the label “Word of God” than the prevailing practices of preaching, scripture lessons, silent reading, and theologizing.

How this might happen is eloquently described by Karl Barth in his description of how biblical exegesis can lead to experience of presence:

. . . how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible.⁵³

⁵² Hoffman, 353.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7.

If the walls between past and present can become transparent through an experience of the written word, how much more completely might they disappear through an experience of the spoken word. The “text” was originally experienced orally, with all the nuance of meaning and potential of impact made possible by personal delivery. It is fully possible to experience it that way again.

“Biblical storytelling” refers to the act of a person who has internalized—learned by heart, lived with, prayed with, interacted with—a scripture passage, and then delivers it “in person” with no written word mediating between teller and hearer. This practice does not seem to have occurred in formal worship since the early days of the church. African American preaching may present an exception, though the biblical stories are generally woven into the sermon in creative adaptations rather than performed as distinct entities following a translation from the original Greek or Hebrew. Given the call among both Catholics and Protestants for a revitalization of the Word among us, and the yearning for spiritual meaning in contemporary culture, perhaps it is time for a review and revitalization of this ancient practice.

Nürnbergger bases his understanding of the Word of God on Martin Luther’s concept of the “living voice of the gospel” (*viva vox Evangelii*), quoting Luther:

Christ wrote nothing and spoke everything. The Apostles wrote little and spoke much. The office of the new covenant is not built on tablets of stone that are dead, but on the sound of the living voice.⁵⁴

Such an understanding almost shouts for the artistry of a biblical storyteller, though because so few have experienced it, there are few to advocate for it. Nürnbergger considers

⁵⁴ Nürnbergger, 4.

God's Word from an experiential perspective congruent with twenty-first century sensibilities as well as with the biblical witness:

The Word of God is the living address of the living God to living people through the words, the fellowship and the behavior of a living community of believers.⁵⁵

The Word of God is not just a story—not even a vocalized, sacred story—told in a vacuum, nor to wage rhetorical war. It is an event occurring both within the covenantal community, and in the covenantal community's witness. It is where the biblical witness is recalled aloud in awareness of the Spirit's active presence for love of God and neighbor. The event includes an invitation to wrap the biblical witness around one's life experiences and share the connections that emerge.

This is where the need and practice of discernment enters the scene. What are the connections between the ancient story and contemporary experience that reflect the intent of the Spirit? What is the Word the Spirit intends to be heard today through the telling and the hearing of the story? It is a quest for “storied knowing” as Lisa Hess names it.⁵⁶ In her book *Artisinal Theology* Hess articulates the interplay of divine revelation, story, orality, participatory community, and discernment:

One could surmise that storying appears to be one of God's ways of self-revelation within history, lived experience, and communities of faith over time. Each generation of the church is faced with the challenge of hearing and telling those stories, the ones that caught the imagination of previous communities of faith, and the ones that the Spirit intends for discipleship today. Discernment is the practice that undergirds the communal awareness and claiming of those stories.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Nürnberger, 4.

⁵⁶ Lisa M. Hess, *Artisinal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 48.

⁵⁷ Hess, 49-50.

The context for Hess' statement is a discussion of telling one's spiritual autobiography in a small group setting. It is profoundly relevant to the development of a Circle of the Word experience for small groups of men or women incarcerated in America's jails and prisons.

Biblical storytelling is an answer to the pragmatic problem of how God becomes "a present reality or experienced as a power that can make things happen, when God is accessed through a lifeless text."⁵⁸ If the Word of God is ultimately an event of God's revelatory communication, God's personal presence, God's loving power, then the most direct way of experiencing God's Word is likely to happen when a sacred story is re-presented in a telling by someone who has studied it, prayed with it, and learned it by heart. This conviction is foundational to the "Breath of Fresh Air" project and the Circle of the Word ministry model.

⁵⁸ Horsefield, 178.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the eighth century BCE when the Greeks were beginning to write, Hesiod recorded the ancient myth¹ of how hope came into the world. According to Hesiod, it happened like this: Zeus, the king of the gods, did not like men and sought a way to make life difficult for them. So he had a woman created named Pandora and sent her with a rich dowry to a foolish man named Epimetheus (which means “think later”). She also brought a sealed jar with the words “DO NOT OPEN” written on its neck. Though Epimetheus had been warned never to accept gifts from the gods by his brother Prometheus (which means “think first”), he immediately accepted the jar and opened it. All the troubles of the world flew out. At the bottom of the jar was one thing more: hope.

Hope is an intangible and essential aspect of human experience, especially in light of all the troubles that accompany life. The lack of hope threatens the well-being of individuals and communities. The narrative of Solomon Northrup about his experience as a Louisiana field slave in the mid-nineteenth century expresses his recollection of teetering on the edge of hopelessness:

I knew not now whither to look for deliverance. Hopes sprang up in my heart only to be crushed and blighted. The summer of my life was passing away; I felt I was

¹ “Myth” derives from the ancient Greek word *muthos* which originally meant “utterance” and came to mean “a spoken or written story.” David Bellingham, *An Introduction to Greek Mythology* (London, England: Quintet Publishing Limited, 1989), 6.

growing prematurely old; that a few years more, and toil, and grief, and the poisonous miasmas of the swamps would accomplish their work upon me—would consign me to the grave’s embrace, to moulder and be forgotten. The hope of rescue was the only light that cast a ray of comfort on my heart. That was now flickering, faint and low; another breath of disappointment would extinguish it altogether, leaving me to grope in midnight darkness to the end of life.²

Captivity, whether by chattel slavery or criminal conviction, seriously strains the capacity for hope without which life is unbearable.

Many of the biblical scriptures came into being as a hopeful response to experiences of captivity. People experienced God as willing and working for their deliverance—from the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans. In times of distress they remembered and “re-membered,” through vivid telling of internalized stories, how God had been present and powerful in the past and had promised good for them in the future. Their part was to place their trust in “the one true God” and demonstrate that trust through obedience to a moral code of behavior. The hope that gave birth to the stories of the biblical tradition and subsequently nurtured the hopefulness of future generations gave people the ability to experience life as meaningful.

The learning and telling of biblical stories, therefore, should be a resource for developing hopeful thinking in jails and prisons. In pursuit of approaches for strengthening the spirit of those who are incarcerated, this paper will explore the concept of hope from the perspective of the social sciences. One of the predominant venues for the scientific study of hope is the field of positive psychology. Therefore, positive psychology will be a starting point for this investigation of hope.

² Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York, NY: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 235.

Positive Psychology

In 1954 Abraham Maslow observed that the field of psychology had devoted much more attention to the negatives in human behavior than to the positives, writing that it had revealed much about human shortcomings and sins, but little about human potentialities and virtues: “It is as if psychology has voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, the darker, meaner half.”³ The troubles let loose from Pandora’s jar drew more attention from psychologists than the antidote for their destructiveness. Maslow identified the problem and coined the term “positive psychology” in the concluding chapter of his book on *Motivation and Personality*. He called for the field of psychology to free itself from the “pessimistic, negative, and limited conception of the full height to which the human being can attain”⁴ and focus on the positive.

A more sympathetic perspective on the historic bent of psychology toward the negative is that the field has studied “the darker, meaner half” for the admirable purpose of “understanding and ameliorating psychological problems.”⁵ Nevertheless, the call for attention to the positive side of the human psyche was prophetic. An improved understanding of what constitutes and nourishes good living can be helpful to those seeking growth as well as to those seeking more wholesale transformation, as is the case with many in prison.

³ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 354.

⁴ Maslow, 353.

⁵ Michael A. Cohn and Barbara L. Fredrickson, “Positive Emotions” in *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, eds. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

Individual researchers began to explore aspects of “the good life” through scientific methods. One such pioneer was Rick Snyder who worked diligently as an individual researcher on the topic of hope since the early 1970’s. But it was over forty years before collective follow-up to Maslow’s observation occurred. Around 1999 Martin Seligman challenged the psychological community to pay more attention to “the good in people and in the world” with the following conviction: “By using the same techniques and tools that help us explain weakness and prevent or treat illness, we could enhance our understanding of strengths and promote well-being.”⁶ Through networking, collaboration and advocacy by academics such as Snyder, a new approach to the scientific study of human experience began.

As a turn of the millennium phenomenon, the field of positive psychology is still in its infancy. Nonetheless, it has already borne fruit for “normal” people through online programs designed to increase optimism and teach children how to be hopeful, resilient learners. Proponents are confident that continued research will help “meet the basic needs of children and adults and society at large.”⁷ However, as a science its esteem in the academic community has suffered from “soft-hitting” media coverage that “focuses on happiness and the shortcuts to it.”⁸ In the field, this is known as the “hedonic definition”

⁶ Shane J. Lopez and Matthew W. Gallagher, “A Case for Positive Psychology” in *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, eds. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

⁷ Lopez and Gallagher, 6.

⁸ Lopez and Gallagher, 4.

of happiness, having to do with “good moods and pleasurable experiences”⁹ and is indeed part of the work of positive psychology.

To counteract the bad press associated with hedonism, positive psychologists have tended to emphasize the “eudaemonic definition” of happiness which has to do with personal growth, meaningful occupation, and connection with others.¹⁰ The fruit of this focus is evident in works such as *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* by Marshall Rosenberg. This book has resourced people in many contexts around the world. It is currently used as a study guide for incarcerated women in a state prison. As a Jewish child in urban Detroit, Rosenberg personally experienced the “the darker, meaner half” of humanity through “race war” between blacks and whites and violent anti-Semitism. These experiences inspired his study of human psychology from the traditional negative manner, asking “What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively?” The other question guiding his vocation was, “What allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances?”¹¹ This is a question exemplifying the eudaemonic focus of positive psychology.

Positive psychology research has clarified that in lived experience, the two faces of happiness are interwoven, rather than being in conflict with one another. For those coming to this research from a spiritual vantage point the word “blessing”—sometimes translated “happiness”—might be a fitting name for the domain of positive psychology.

⁹ Cohn and Fredrickson, 20.

¹⁰ Cohn and Fredrickson, 20.

¹¹ Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2003), 1.

The meaning of blessing is broad enough to include both pleasurable feelings and beneficent dispositions. The goal of twenty-first-century positive psychology reaches back to the age-old question addressed in philosophy and religion, “What makes a good life and a good person?”¹² Perhaps by answering this question, it will become more apparent how to help persons who are deemed “bad” by society, and hence locked away, move toward “goodness” in life and character.

After extensive data collection and analysis across time and cultures, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman identified six core virtues or strengths of human life. These are abstract ideals, “encompassing a number of other, more specific virtues that reliably converge to the recognizable higher-order category.”¹³ The following is the listing and description of the “High Six” as formulated by Peterson and Seligman in their handbook of *Character Strengths and Virtues*:¹⁴

1. **Wisdom and knowledge**—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
2. **Courage**—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
3. **Humanity**—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
4. **Justice**—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
5. **Temperance**—strengths that protect against excess
6. **Transcendence**—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

¹² Ed Diener, “Positive Psychology: Past, Present, and Future” in *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, C.R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, eds. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

¹³ Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁴ The nickname for the core virtues given them by Peterson and Seligman. The listing and descriptions are also their words from Table 1.1 in *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 29-30.

The specific virtues or “strengths” named in the transcendence category are: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. Thus, in the positive psychology scheme of character strengths and virtues, hope is located as a transcendent value. Kant described the transcendent as being “that which is beyond human knowledge.”¹⁵ Peterson and Seligman define transcendence as “the connection to something higher—the belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves.” This helps explain why the experience of hopelessness is so closely related to the sense that life has no meaning. A jump from hopelessness is often made to the conviction that life has no value or point, with the consequential loss of will to live.¹⁶

The higher purpose, as explained by Peterson and Seligman in their description of transcendence, may be of a religious or spiritual nature, but not necessarily. It “does need to be sacred but does not need to be divine.” According to them, it may be “something or someone earthly that inspires awe, hope, or even gratitude—anything that makes our everyday concerns seem trifling and the self seem small.”¹⁷ Many things might thereby satisfy the need for transcendence which from a Judeo-Christian perspective would be labeled as idolatry. The relative value of candidates for higher purpose is worth considering in deliberations about ultimate reality. For now it will suffice to note that one of the six core values of human life includes attention to the transcendent as experienced in Christian hope.

¹⁵ Peterson and Seligman, 38.

¹⁶ Existentialists like Camus did not make this jump. Camus presented a case for courage in the face of the absence of transcendent realities and the resulting affirmation of meaninglessness in existence.

¹⁷ Peterson and Seligman, 39.

It is significant that hope is categorized alongside spirituality (with the descriptors religiousness, faith, purpose) as a transcendent value. The notion of strengthening one's spirit by nurturing hope makes sense in light of this relationship. Conversely, one might nurture hope in order to strengthen the human spirit. Attention might well be given to the other transcendent virtues—appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and humor—and to how they might intertwine in a program of personal transformation.¹⁸ However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will continue to be on hope.

The classification of hope includes further descriptors: optimism, future-mindedness, and future orientation; expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about. This last definition is remarkably similar to that given by an incarcerated man in a brainstorming session on associations of the word “hope.” He said, “Hope is looking for a better future.” Another man offered this response: “Hope is a belief that something good is about to happen.” Hope, then, is a certain orientation to the future.

Sometimes this orientation is toward specific objectives with intentional effort to achieve them. The aforementioned brainstorming exercise evoked responses such as “striving and focus” and “hope for understanding and forgiveness.” In psychological research, hope is often narrowed to a cognitive act that results in certain behaviors, presumably because this is possible to test and quantify. Elsewhere hope is usually understood as having an emotional aspect, something that is *felt* as opposed to simply

¹⁸ This is a compelling sisterhood of values because the Circle of the Word program design has included aspects of humor, playfulness, artistic expression and gratitude as well as faith and spirituality. Now that the connection has been made to transcendence for these elements, the program will consider their more intentional inclusion.

known. Some responses to the brainstorming exercise coupled hope with emotions: “Hope brings joy,” “Hope blossoms into love,” Hope is patient endurance.” The previously quoted passage from *Twelve Years a Slave* is a passionate expression of Solomon Northrup’s feelings regarding the demise of hope.

The captive exiles of ancient Israel struggled with hopelessness, as did enslaved African Americans like Solomon Northrup. It is a common experience of people directly impacted by today’s mass incarceration. Living without hope is like living without breath. It is not possible.

Positive Emotions

To the extent that hope is an emotion, and to the extent that hope is beneficial,¹⁹ discussions about the role of positive emotion in a “full and well-lived life” are relevant to this study of hope. Michael Cohn and Barbara Fredrickson provide such discussion in their report on a theory they have developed called the “broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions.” This theory grew out of their attempt to give positive emotions equal weight as negative ones in shaping a theoretical framework for understanding emotions and their function in human life and culture. The basic claim of the broaden-and-build theory is: “positive emotions ‘broaden’ people’s momentary thought-action repertoires and lead to actions that ‘build’ enduring personal resources.”²⁰

¹⁹ Sometimes hope is connected with falsity or lack of realism and can be viewed as a negative component of character. The assumption in this context is that hope is a positive element of human personality and behavior.

²⁰ Cohn and Fredrickson, 14-15.

In contrast to negative emotions, positive emotions rarely occur in response to life-threatening situations. Negative emotions evoke specific, focused responses such as flight or fight, which are prompted by the emotions of fear, disgust, or anger. As explained by Cohn and Fredrickson, “Instead, positive emotions lead to *broadened* and *more flexible* response tendencies, widening the array of thoughts and actions that come to mind.”²¹ They offer examples:

Joy, for instance, creates the urge to play, whether physically, socially, or intellectually. Interest creates the urge to explore, take in new information and experiences, and expand the self in the process. Love—which we view as an amalgam of several positive emotions—creates urges to play with, learn about, and savor our loved ones.²²

Positive emotions grow a person. They lead to behaviors that expand the horizon of a person’s experience and capacity. And they fuel the potential for transformation, for this “broadening” aspect leads to the “building” aspect.

Broadening enables characteristics to develop that provide a firm foundation for human life to thrive. As Cohen and Fredrickson explain, “Broadened thought-action repertoires did not evolve because of their short-term survival benefits...but because of their long-term effects. Broadening “builds” personal resources.” Broadening has to do with “the ways people change while experiencing a positive emotion” and building has to do with “the lasting changes that follow repeated positive emotional experiences over time.”²³ Both strengthen a person.

²¹ Cohn and Fredrickson, 15.

²² Cohn and Fredrickson, 15.

²³ Cohn and Fredrickson, 15.

Research has targeted each of these two aspects of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Results of studies with regard to the broadening aspect, detailed by Cohn and Fredrickson,²⁴ include the following:

1. Positive emotions produce patterns of thought that are unusual, flexible, inclusive, creative, and receptive to new information.
2. People experiencing positive emotions tend to become more imaginative and attentive regarding things they could do for friends.
3. Induced positive emotions can increase trust toward strangers.
4. People become less ethnically biased in their face perception and at the same time less perceptive of physical differences between people of different ethnic groups.

Results of studies with regard to the build aspect indicate that:

1. Positive emotions contribute to an upward spiral of increasing resources, life successes, and overall fulfillment
2. People who experience high levels of positive emotions tend to experience less pain and disability related to chronic health conditions, fight off illness and disease more successfully, and live longer.
3. There is an “undo effect” of positive emotions whereby people who are generally resilient against negative events recover more quickly and do so by self-generating positive emotions during the recovery process.

In 2008, Cohen and Frederickson conducted an experiment to test the build hypothesis. It is significant because the results included a wide range of benefits, including an increase in hope. Here is the description of the experiment and its results:

Participants in the experimental group were trained in loving-kindness meditation . . . which focuses on deliberately generating the positive emotions of compassion and love. After 3 weeks of practice, meditators began reporting higher daily levels of various positive emotions compared to those in the waitlist control group. After 8 weeks, meditators showed increases in a number of personal resources, including physical wellness, agency for achieving important goals [hope], ability to savor positive experiences, and quality of close relationships.²⁵

²⁴ Results listed here of both the broaden and build hypotheses are quoted from Cohn and Fredrickson in *Oxford Handbook*, 16-19.

²⁵ Cohn and Fredrickson, 17-18.

This experiment is also significant because the methods used to attain the described benefits can easily be implemented in a biblical storytelling workshop. A study of the details of this experiment, as well as the experimental work on mindfulness meditation which Cohn and Fredrickson reference, should prove helpful in designing transformative learning experiences through biblical storytelling with people who are incarcerated.

In addition to their own research, Cohn and Fredrickson report on other studies which demonstrate that positive emotions are associated with the ability to take a longer view and develop plans and goals for the future.²⁶ These abilities are cognitive aspects of hope, as will be explained in the section on hope theory. Also related to the quality of hope is the impact of positive emotions on people who experience prolonged negative situations like bereavement, joblessness, enslavement, or incarceration. These threats to the person cannot be averted or overcome by “the kind of immediate, narrowly defined action that negative emotions encourage.” Psychological resilience in the face of ongoing, negative circumstances is enhanced by some level of positive emotions alongside the unavoidable negative ones. The ability to engage positive emotions even under duress is not a denial of reality, but rather the fruit of acquired emotional intelligence, for, as they observe, “a broad emotional lexicon makes it possible to find positive moments without denying the seriousness of a negative situation.”²⁷

Research on positive emotions has frequently used self-report methods to ascertain emotional states of those participating in various studies. A “Multiple Affect Adjective Check List” was developed for this purpose, but with 132 items included in its

²⁶ Cohn and Fredrickson, 18.

²⁷ Cohn and Fredrickson, 18.

list is has proved too unwieldy for most experimental settings. Subsequently, the modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES) was developed which is much more pragmatic with a list of only 19 items: amusement, anger, awe, compassion, contempt, contentment, disgust, embarrassment, gratitude, hope, joy, interest, love, pride, guilt, sadness, shame, fear, and surprise.²⁸ Hope is classified as a basic positive emotion.

Other methods for measuring positive emotions have been developed that provide more accurate and detailed information than do the self-report measures. For example, the use of technology to assess facial responses achieves better results: “In *facial electromyography* (facial EMG), electrical sensors placed on the face detect changes in muscle tension.”²⁹ The facial EMG identifies when a person is smiling in a “spontaneous” or “nonposed” manner, even if the smile is too subtle to be observed with the naked eye. Neuroimaging studies of the brain and cardiovascular studies are also informing the empirical exploration of positive emotions.³⁰

An interesting aspect of the effort to study positive emotions using scientific methods is the recognition by some researchers of a spiritual dimension of human experience. As previously mentioned, one study had included “loving-kindness meditation.” Another utilized “mindfulness meditation.” Both of these were variations of guided meditations—a spiritual practice or, in other words, a form of prayer. Several studies aimed at developing effective practices of intervention³¹ use counting blessings as

²⁸ Cohn and Fredrickson, 19.

²⁹ Cohn and Fredrickson, 20.

³⁰ Cohn and Fredrickson, 19-20.

³¹ Note the technical meaning of “intervention.”

a core activity.³² This is a common practice in religious contexts. It is known as “prayers of thanksgiving” when directed to God. In a 2006 study, E. M. W. Tong concluded: “distinguishing different positive emotions may require attention to dimensions of experience that researchers have not previously thought of as inherent to emotion, such as social connection and *spiritual experience*”³³ (emphasis added).

Conclusions reached by Cohen and Fredrickson’s examination of research on positive emotions are significant for a project aimed at undergirding the transformational learning of incarcerated persons. At a foundational level, they affirm that “positive emotions help move participants from entrenched habits to new and adaptive ways of acting.” Simply put, positive emotions facilitate transformational learning. When a person is incarcerated they will be required to engage in adaptive attitudes and behaviors to the culture of the correctional institution, many of which may be destructive. The “entrenched habits” to move away from should be those habits of mind, spirit, and behavior that led to incarceration and which develop as a result of incarceration. The “new and adaptive ways of acting” should be those ways that help inmates shed the detrimental ways of their past on the outside, cope with the negatives of incarceration in as productive manner as possible, and prepare them for success upon re-entry into their community.

Another conclusion is that positive emotions encourage participants to maintain their involvement in a program. Religious programming in correctional institutions is appropriately voluntary. While one-shot experiences may be the occasion for a life-

³² Cohn and Fredrickson, 20.

³³ Cohn and Fredrickson, 20.

changing moment, or may “plant a seed” that bears future fruit, it is much more likely that meaningful growth will occur when a person chooses regular participation over a number of weeks, if not months. Therefore, whatever encourages an inmate to “stick with a program” is worth integrating into that program.

Hope Theory

If it is the case that positive emotions and behaviors have historically been downplayed by psychiatry, hope as an aspect of human experience has been almost completely ignored. In 1959 Karl Menninger addressed the academy with a lecture on hope because, in his words:

Our shelves hold many books now on the place of *faith* in science and psychiatry, and on the vicissitudes of man’s efforts to *love* and to be loved. But when it comes to hope, our shelves are bare. The journals are silent. The Encyclopedia Britannica devotes many columns to the topic of love, and many more to faith. But hope, poor little hope! She is not even listed.³⁴

Menninger personally encouraged C. R. Snyder to fill the void. Since conducting a series of studies on excuse-making in the late 1970s and early eighties, Snyder had been intrigued with hope as “the other side of excusing.”³⁵ Following a review of the existing literature in the late eighties, Snyder dedicated himself to pulling together the scattered work that had been done, networking with interested scholars to further the cause.

In collaboration with students and colleagues at the University of Kansas, Snyder then devoted his career as a teacher, theoretician, and researcher to the study of hope. His

³⁴ Karl Menninger, M.D., “The Academic Lecture on Hope” in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* (December 1959), 116: 481-491.

³⁵ C. R. Snyder, “Hypothesis: There Is Hope,” in *A Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications*, ed. C. R. Snyder (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000), 6.

work has been critical to the development of the field of positive psychology in general, as well as to the understanding of hope—its components, dynamics and significance in human life. Snyder's death in 2006 was mourned by many; his contributions to the field live on in his own work and in the work of those he mentored and inspired.

Snyder's *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* includes sections on his theory of hope, on how hope develops and deteriorates, on methods for measuring hope, on therapeutic applications of hope theory, and on hope with regard to particular populations (children, elderly people, athletes, survivors of trauma, etc.). Hope with regard to people who are incarcerated does not have a dedicated chapter among the eleven specific groups addressed, but much of the book's content would be relevant to this population and warrants further study. Snyder identifies other topics related to hope in the work of positive psychologists. These include optimism, self efficacy, esteem theories, and problem solving. For purposes of this paper, discussion will be limited to summarizing Snyder's theory of hope.

The working definition Snyder gave for hopeful thinking was as follows: "Hope is the sum of perceived capabilities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes."³⁶ Subsequent definitions were variations on this initial one, all of which focus on three factors: goals, pathways, and agency. **Goals** refer to the endpoint of a person's directed efforts. They include achievements to be accomplished (for example, getting a job), states to be experienced (freedom), roles to be embodied (motherhood), or things to be acquired (a house). In Snyder's words, they are the "anchors of hope theory." The goal for Solomon Northrup was rescue from slavery.

³⁶ Snyder, "Hypothesis: There Is Hope," 8.

Deliverance was the anchor of his hope without which he “would be left to grope in midnight darkness” the rest of his days.

Because the theory focuses on cognition, hopeful *thinking*, it follows that goals must be conscious. Snyder assumes a necessary relation between value and awareness—“Goals need to be of sufficient value to occupy our conscious thought”—which is a questionable assumption that does not seem warranted, but probably is necessary for experimental research to be a possibility. Snyder’s approach focuses on hopefulness as a thought process more than hope as an emotion. His view is: “*emotions are a by-product of goal-directed thought*—positive emotions reflecting perceived success in the pursuit of goals, and negative emotions reflecting perceived failures.”³⁷ This view is reflected in the comment by the man who said, “Hope brings joy.”

A second aspect of the goal factor involves its probability. The chances of reaching a goal could be thought of as a continuum from 0% probability to 100% probability where neither end of the continuum actually involves hope. Something that is one hundred percent probable is just going to happen. It is a *certainty*, not an object of hope. Something that is zero percent probable will not happen, no matter what, and so is also a certainty rather than an object of hope. Snyder reports: “research corroborates the contention that people see hope as thriving under conditions of intermediate probability of goal attainment.”³⁸

The quote from Solomon Northrup’s narrative about his experience in slavery takes place following a failed attempt to get rescued. He is saying that his hope for rescue

³⁷ Snyder, “Hypothesis: There Is Hope,” 10.

³⁸ Snyder, “Hypothesis: There Is Hope,” 9.

is nearing the point of zero, the state of hopelessness, where hope no longer exists. Once he is in fact rescued and reunited with his family his hope for rescue is also gone because it has happened. He then turns his hope toward the rescue of others by working on the Underground Railroad.

Judgments about the wisdom, or even the sanity, of a particular instance of hopeful thinking involve the degree to which the calculation of certainty is something determined objectively or subjectively. A goal may be completely improbable by objective standards, but nevertheless perceived as a possibility by a given individual. The more improbable the goal, the more ridicule the person will take from peers who judge them foolish, especially if the probability is deemed zero. But sometimes persistent hope of what seems impossible pays big dividends. For example, objectively, there is zero percent probability that a person can fly. From an objective perspective, flight should not involve hope. Nevertheless, the dream of flight has been around since at least the time of the ancient Greeks. Even in the face of objective impossibility, the goal of flight inspired its attempt by many people for many centuries until finally achieved by Orville and Wilbur Wright of Dayton, Ohio.

This points to the second factor of hope theory: **pathways**. Pathways or “pathway thoughts” are routes to desired goals. So if jumping off a cliff with arms spread like an eagle’s wings won’t work, try constructing a wing-like structure that attaches to the arms. If that doesn’t work, try attaching yourself to a giant kite, or hanging from a silk bag filled with hot air. “High-hope” people try many pathways to arrive at their goal until one finally works, if not for them, then for someone else who builds on their work and on their hope. When Solomon’s first effort to send a letter north explaining his situation and

requesting help was sabotaged, he tried again when the opportunity presented itself. His first pathway did not achieve the desired goal, but his second pathway did.

Along with goals and pathways, the third component of hope as conceived by Snyder's hope theory is **agency**. Agency has to do with motivation. It is the energy that drives a person or community toward the goal that is the endpoint of hope. Agency has to do with one's will to achieve a goal, with determination or grit, with the ability to persevere despite setbacks. The setback Solomon Northrup experienced when he was betrayed to the man to whom he entrusted his letter was excruciating. But, despite the low probability of success and the high cost of failure, he tried again.

Agency has to do with how people respond to the obstacles they encounter in the pathway to their goal. Do they construct work-arounds? Do they look for another pathway? Do they adapt or alter their goal? Do they "keep on keeping on" or do they give up? What are the resources they bring to bear on the achievement of their goals? These are all factors related to the concept of agency as an aspect of hopeful behavior.

Agency is reflected in the association with hope identified by one man in prison as "striving and focus." The sources of the energy for effective agency—its nurturing, sustenance and dissipation—are all aspects of hope theory. They are factors to consider in designing a program intended to strengthen the spirit of people who are incarcerated. Mary Hallinan, who organizes and leads a circle program based on values with women incarcerated at the Montgomery County Jail affirmed the importance of hope for the women she has come to know in her work there. She designs and leads peacemaking circles on specific themes each week. The women requested a circle on the theme of

hope. A design was developed based on the three aspects of hopeful thinking: goals, pathways, and agency.

The stories of God's presence and activity among the human community as recorded in the Hebrew and Greek scriptures of the Bible have been a source of hope for many people, especially those experiencing captivity of one kind or another. They have provided transcendent strength for Hebrews enslaved by Egypt, Jews captured by Babylon, Christians persecuted by Rome, Africans kidnapped to the Americas, and many citizens of many nations who found themselves behind bars. Then there are all the ways in which individuals and communities are captive to destructive memories and habits of mind, body, soul who have found hope for deliverance through internalized biblical stories. And, finally, there is the existential challenge to hope presented by the certainty of sin and death, addressed directly in the Gospels. The learning and telling of biblical stories undergird the core virtue of transcendence by encouraging hope.

CHAPTER SIX

“BREATH OF FRESH AIR” PROJECT

Overview

The “Breath of Fresh Air” project was borne out of desire to address the brokenness represented by mass incarceration and make a positive difference in the lives of those directly impacted by it. The desire was coupled with a hunch about the positive potential of biblical storytelling in detention ministry, specifically with regard to the virtue of hope. The goal of the project was to learn whether or not that hunch reflects reality.

An aspect of this primary goal was genuine curiosity about how incarcerated individuals would respond to such a program and its specific elements. How would various pedagogical methods be experienced? What improvements would be suggested by participants? Would they choose to participate? Would they recommend the program to others? What benefits would they perceive in participation?

There was also an interest in seeing to what extent internalizing the specific story of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection would be a source of hope. What other dynamics would the experience of learning these particular stories by heart have on participants? More basic yet was the question of whether or not they would actually do the work to learn scripture by heart and tell the stories to other people.

Other questions to explore in the project revolved around its context. Would there be a way to build a local church ministry into the model? If so, what would be the impact? How would the project be perceived by the institutional gatekeepers and how would it relate to their goals? The “Breath of Fresh Air” project sought to answer these questions.

Research Approach

Philosophical Worldview

In planning a study, John Creswell advises the researcher to consider what philosophical worldview he or she is bringing to the project.¹ Of the options for worldview that Creswell identifies, the **transformative worldview** most accurately depicts the worldview brought to this project. The underlying perspective of the project is announced by Jesus of Nazareth quoting the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit [breath] of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1-2, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18). It is grounded in the conviction that Jesus breathed God’s spirit into his disciples to liberate them from the forces of sin and death so that they might transform the world.

Research conducted out of a transformational worldview is characterized by three normative themes. Donna Mertens identifies these themes in her book on *Transformative Research and Evaluation* as:

¹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, And Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2014), 5.

Underlying assumptions that rely on ethical stances of inclusion and challenge oppressive social structures.

An entry process into the community that is designed to build trust and make goals and strategies transparent.

Dissemination of findings in ways that encourage use of the results to enhance social justice and human rights.²

These themes were present in the “Breath of Fresh Air” project from initial conception through implementation. They will continue to guide future developments of the ministry model.

Research Design

The research design for this project was a **mixed methods** approach, with an emphasis on qualitative research. The end goal of the project was not scientific proof of a hypothesis. The number of participants in the study was not large enough for quantitative results to be statistically significant. However, quantitative measures serve to solicit opinions of participants, convey respect for those opinions, and prime the pump for reflective feedback. The combination of qualitative and quantitative measurements provided a rich variety of illuminating data.

Data Collection Methods

A range of methods were used to collect data for this project including Likert-type scales, open-ended questions, journaling, survey forms, observation notes and recordings, oral and written evaluation by institutional leaders, group discussion, and one-on-one

² Donna M. Mertens, *Transformative Research and Evaluation* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2009), 5.

interviews. All but one of the instruments of data collection were developed by the researcher. Two instruments were intended to capture only quantitative data, several captured both quantitative and qualitative, and others solely qualitative. The methods will be described in detail in a later section of this chapter.

Ministry Model

Overview of Model Implementation

The model was implemented in three contexts—a prison, a jail, and a local church—during the season of Lent in the Spring of 2014. The model was a weekly spiritual formation program, generally called “Sacred Stories.” It focused on the internalization of biblical stories from the passion, death and resurrection narrative as recorded in the Gospel of Mark. There was an additional story from John’s Gospel in one context (the jail). Detailed “scripts” for each session were developed for each context. The basic approach and content of the program for each context was similar, but other factors related to the program differed: number and duration of sessions, range of activities, methods and volume of data collection. A description of the model as implemented in each of the three contexts follows.

The prison context was Chillicothe Correctional Institute (CCI) located outside Chillicothe, Ohio. CCI is a medium security prison for men. The model was implemented in the Horizon community within CCI as one of a number of optional courses men could elect to take. Horizon is a year-long, voluntary, interfaith program for select inmates. The Sacred Stories course was limited to twelve and was fully subscribed. In addition, an inmate mentor (“Encourager”) participated in the course and assisted with its

implementation as well as with data collection. Consequently most of the data reports results from thirteen men. This was a stable group of men with few absences.

The course consisted of eight sessions over nine weeks. These were meant to be ninety-minute sessions, but most often were nearly two hours. Each session dealt with a section of Mark 14-16 in chronological order and focused on a specific story within that section. The final session included an “epic telling” of the full narrative by all participants in the course, including the Encourager and researcher. Participants received weekly reading and journaling assignments. The Horizon program coordinator was always present in the classroom, and at times interacted with the group.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant before and after the eight-week course. Course goals were listed on a syllabus that was distributed as part of the pre-course interviews. The stated goals were: (1) Create “a community of reliable others” where each person’s voice can be heard in an atmosphere of mutual respect; (2) Allow the stories to help us become more fully who God wants us to be; (3) Know one story well enough to be able to tell it to another person; (4) Gain the personal power that comes from being firmly grounded in sacred stories. During the pre-course interview it was explained that the course was an action research project for a Doctor of Ministry degree program at United Theological Seminary. Confidentiality was assured.

The jail context was Montgomery County Jail (MCJ) in downtown Dayton, Ohio. The program was implemented with women. The jail chaplain selected participants from those who requested attendance by sending him a “kite” message. Jail terms are often short so there were always new women each week along with some who were returning. Two other “outside” women attended each week on a rotating basis—assisting with

program mechanics, observation, and data collection. They also fully participated in class activities. The same stories from Mark 14-16 were covered in eight sessions. The series included a ninth session on the story of Jesus' appearance to his disciples in the locked room from John 20. Sessions lasted ninety minutes, starting and stopping pretty much on schedule. The chaplain kept a description of the program in his office in case anyone asked him about it; it was not publically posted. This read as follows:

Biblical stories have been a source of hope, courage and wisdom for all kinds of people throughout history, and they can be for you, too. You are invited to attend the Sacred Stories class to hear, learn and interact with the scriptures in a variety of ways. Activities include storytelling, art, and music. Our engagement with the stories will be both creative and thoughtful as we explore connections to our lives, and listen for words of comfort and guidance from the Holy Spirit. This March-April we will focus on stories about Jesus' passion, death and resurrection from the Gospel of Mark."

The research component of the Sacred Stories program was explained at the beginning of each class, along with assurances of confidentiality for participants. Survey instruments were given as an optional activity. The women always completed them, and in fact, expressed disappointment when none were distributed in the ninth session.

While the focus of the "Breath of Fresh Air" project was ministry with incarcerated persons, the model was also implemented in an adult Sunday school class at Grace United Methodist Church in Dayton, Ohio. This was done for comparative purposes. The local church context provided a relatively stable group of roughly ten men and women most of whom attend the Sunday school class on a regular basis. There were six sessions, omitting the resurrection story (Mark 16:1-8) since the class did not meet on Easter Sunday. The time allotted was forty-five minutes. Initially there was only about thirty minutes due to the practice of late arrival. This time constraint necessitated a

significant revision of the design as used in the detention settings. Promotion of the class went as follows:

During Lent the Christian Conversations Sunday School class is engaging the stories about Jesus' passion according to the Gospel of Mark. This is a time for those who want to grow in the knowledge of our Lord this Lent by walking with him through the last days of his life on earth. You are invited to come, hear, and interact with the sacred stories at the heart of our Christian tradition. The stories we are learning are: The Anointing, The Last Passover, The Arrest, Peter's Denial, Pilate's Sentencing, Jesus' Death. These are hard stories that compel us to look deeply into our own experience. For two millennia they have been a source of hope, courage, faith, and inspiration. Join us in the Chapel at 9:30 a.m. any Sunday. Each class is a stand-alone session led by the Rev. Amelia Boomershine.

The project model presented a very different process than the tradition of the Sunday school class, which required adaptation by class members. They were good sports and did their best to accommodate the changes. It was amusing to experience the first class session as much more difficult to lead than either the jail or prison classes. Adjustments in both design and expectation were made, and things went smoother in subsequent classes. Final feedback from participants was insightful and positive.

Venue Selection

Work with incarcerated persons by this researcher was more a calling than a reality when the project was envisioned. Programs in detention settings are difficult to initiate due to the high priority on security, the limitations of space and staff time, and the caution of gatekeepers. There was no guarantee that access would be given to a correctional institution for implementing the project. Access in the most favorable candidate, Dayton Correctional Institution, was ultimately denied for security reasons.³

³ The researcher regularly visits an inmate at DCI. Visitation and program leadership are mutually exclusive options in Ohio State prisons.

After a year of exploration two venues suddenly opened up through vocational and project connections. The prison setting developed through connections with the Horizon Prison Initiative and the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. During a program meeting of the Methodist Federation for Social Action at the 2013 Annual Conference, the ministry model was briefly explained to Richard Boone, the Elder appointed as Coordinator of the Horizon Initiative at CCI. When the need for a venue was raised, Boone issued an invitation to come to Chillicothe. The invitation was readily accepted.

Two members of the Context Group led two different programs at the Montgomery County Jail. As a guest leader, the researcher tried out the Circle of the Word design in one of those sessions and was encouraged by the positive response. The doctoral program and project concept was then discussed with MCJ Chaplain Willie Templeton who approved a test program with women as a feasibility study. Final approval was given following a presentation to Templeton's supervisors in a formal interview at the Sheriff's headquarters. After a year of uncertainty about securing a project venue, the opportunity to test its concept in two different correctional settings with both women and men seemed providential.

Feasibility Study

The next step was a feasibility study to test the viability of the Circle of the Word process in the two institutional settings. The goal was to develop a design and try it out before attempting to collect data. A primary reason for the study was to allow the researcher to become acquainted with the research venues before project

implementation—to understand their processes and limitations, establish working relationships with gatekeepers, and gain experience in relating to inmates.

Two Grace church members were recruited to assist with the Circle of the Word pilot program at the jail. The jail proved to be the more challenging of the two correctional settings, highlighting the importance of a supportive partner from the faith community. Challenges included the unstable nature of class constituency and the inmates' uncertainty about their future which caused anxiety. Class membership changed every week. Negative emotions were commonly brought to the class: anxiety, depression, anger, sorrow, frustration. These feelings were obvious from body language, but were also regularly named during the Check-In activity. Also obvious and sometimes named were signs of physical distress. Inmates suffered from stress, exhaustion and the ill effects of substance addictions.

An eight-week series of classes focused on the first chapter of Mark was designed and led at both the jail and the prison. Mark 1 was selected for the test program because it is “the beginning of the good news of Jesus, Anointed One, Son of God” and as such is a good introduction to who Jesus was, what he was about, and the context of his ministry. Mark 1 is a good introduction to biblical storytelling because the stories are short, compelling, and introduce many basic motifs of the gospel. It is also ripe with possible connections to people's life experience today.

Three criteria for a successful pilot program were identified in dialogue with Templeton. Any of the following results were considered to indicate a positive outcome:

1. For some, personal transformation may be realized;
2. For others, a seed may be planted to grow in the future;

3. And for others, the session simply serves as a respite from the pain and stress of the present situation.

Feedback indicated these results are possible through a Circle of the Word process. For example, the following is a sampling of responses given by the men at CCI during the last class of the Fall to the question: What have you achieved?

- Happiness
- Knowledge
- Bonding as a group—I knew the people but now I have a memory, a shared experience
- Openness, positive energy
- Personal healing breakthroughs, skills for future facilitation
- Personal insight
- Creativity

A survey administered that same day asked the men to write what they would say to others about learning biblical stories by heart. The answers were uniformly positive. Here is a sampling:

- The class is a lot of fun, thought provoking and interesting. I consider myself to have poor memory and was unsure if I would remember any of it, but I have!
- If one is a new Christian, or a child, this would be a great creative and fun way to learn about Christ. If someone is a mature Christian, this will bring the joy and life and simplicity in the Word of God. It is alive!!
- It is a powerful exercise to learn because you can identify with the Bible stories intimately. You are able to express the stories effectively without the Bible.
- This is GREAT, a fun learning experience that you'll look forward to every week. This class will definitely help you to memorize Bible verses and will make you wanna get close to God. Work on yourself. You will enjoy this class, which is also very entertaining. This will benefit you in the long run.

Richard Boone's evaluation included the observations that Circle of the Word "created an environment where inmates directly encounter the Word of God" and "the power of God's Word alone touches their heart." In addition he saw that the program "created a

healing circle” where “strategies allowed for the childlike heart of even the most hardened prisoner to find new life.”⁴

An episode from a class about midway through the Fall program was transcribed as a story for telling in a “Crossing Boundaries” program a year later. The program was held at Forest Chapel United Methodist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio on September 28, 2014. Before the event the transcription was emailed to Boone who reviewed it with the two men “named” (real names not given) in the story. The men approved the telling and conveyed that it accurately reflected their memory of the episode. In addition, they told Boone they felt “doubly blessed” by the telling: first, that the episode would be remembered, and second, that it would benefit others who heard about it. Those who heard the story were, indeed, deeply moved. The story followed a telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke. It was entitled “Razor Wire”:

Those who first heard Jesus’ parable about the man who fell into the hands of robbers would not have expected a Samaritan to be the good guy in the story—the one to have compassion and show mercy. Samaritans and Judeans had nothing to do with each other. There was a well-reinforced boundary between them that they did not cross.

Sometimes a person discovers compassion and mercy in an unexpected place, on the other side of a well-reinforced boundary. Let me tell you about a time that happened to me.

A year ago this Fall I was going every Thursday to a state prison to teach a biblical story. The prison is an hour and a half drive straight east from my home in Dayton. It’s a city unto itself, with well-reinforced boundaries between those living on the outside and those living inside. The boundary is marked by a two-story, chain link fence, topped off with coils of razor wire. Razor wire is very effective in preventing people from crossing the boundary by going over the fence.

⁴ These observations were conveyed in a written evaluation sent via email, October 2013.

I was teaching the stories from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark to men in this place.

After the story of Jesus calling his first four disciples comes the story about what happened when they went to the synagogue in Capernaum.

The Thursday we came to that story I told it to the men, taught it to them, and then, on a whim, decided to have them act it out.

A man who I'll call Demetrius volunteered to be Jesus.

A man I'll call Marcus volunteered to be the man with an unclean spirit.

Four men agreed to be disciples.

The rest were the people in the synagogue and I was the narrator.

We all took our places and I began telling the story...

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

Demetrius, AKA Jesus, enters the circle of men with the "disciples" following him.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes.

Everybody acts astounded.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out...

At this point Marcus, that is, the unclean man, jumps up, gets right in Demetrius' face and yells, "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*

Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

As soon as he starts yelling the disciples spring into action to defend Jesus—like bodyguards throwing themselves between the two men, arms spread wide.

Without flinching, in fact coming even closer, Demetrius yells back, "*Be silent, and come out of him!*"

I want you to know, up until this moment, our biblical storytelling classes have been very calm and quiet, polite and controlled.

Now there's convicted felons in each other's faces yelling aggressively!

And Jesus' newbie disciples are ready to down the adversary!

I'm expecting sirens to go off any moment, and CO's to come barging into the room.

But there's no siren, no CO's; I go on narrating the story...

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and yelling with a loud voice, came out of him.

Marcus lets out a wail, then goes limp.

Demetrius puts his arms around him in a gentle embrace.

The story continues...

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another,

“What is this? A new teaching—with authority!

He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

I myself was in amazement at the compassion and mercy I had just experienced inside the boundaries of razor wire.

This story is included here as a window into the Circle of the Word model. It also illuminates the potential impact of the model on both incarcerated participants and the “Circlekeeper” who comes from the outside to lead it.

The pilot program was successful. Responses from participants and co-leaders were positive. Feedback from both Templeton and Boone was encouraging. There was clarity about how to conduct an ethically responsible research project as part of the CCI Horizon curriculum, so project implementation was scheduled there for the Spring term. It was less clear that the jail would be an appropriate venue for research until a conversation with Templeton clarified processes that would safeguard inmate’s rights and be acceptable to jail policy. Thus, the feasibility study resulted in a green light for project implementation at both sites, with additions and adaptations to session design and the development of data collection methods. At the recommendation of Boone, a different set of stories was chosen and a different group of men signed up for the CCI program.

Participant Selection

The process of participant selection at the jail was a combination of self-selection by inmates and approval by the chaplain. Inmates request participation in programs by sending kites to the chaplain. They find out about the program by word of mouth. From these requests the chaplain puts together a list of potential participants according to his

own judgments about class constituency. The peacemaking circle process followed in Circle of the Word dictates a relatively small group, therefore the chaplain was asked to send no more than twelve participants. He generally puts fifteen on the list because usually not everyone eligible to attend comes, usually because they have a visitor or court appearance. As a consequence now and then more than twelve attend. This happened once during the course of the project.

The Horizon selection process was also voluntary. For the feasibility study conducted in the Fall, Boone invited three Encouragers to participate and empowered them to recruit nine more class members. For the project study participants signed up on a sheet posted in the dorm with a description of the class. These individuals were interviewed before the course began, at which time the research project was explained and they were given the opportunity to opt out. Three Encouragers attended the first class and one continued throughout the duration of the program, participating in the class and assisting with data collection.⁵ He also provided advice and counsel for program implementation. The Encourager had been part of the feasibility study, as had some of the other project participants.

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation in research is always important. In a detention setting it is even more essential to safeguard rights of participants and assure the voluntary status of participation. The very nature of incarceration means that there are many serious constrictions on a prisoner's freedom of choice. They are also deprived of some civil

⁵ The other two had responsibilities teaching other Horizon classes.

rights. It would be relatively easy to take advantage of their lack of freedom and power in the interest of research and abuse basic human rights. Research involving religious sensibilities runs the additional risk of undermining separation of church and state. Research conducted through the lens of transformational research theory is sensitive to the vulnerability of marginal populations. Inmate communities are marginal populations cut off from the mainstream of society. Their isolation is assumed to be justified, but it is not to be ignored when conducting research with them.

With these considerations in mind, a form was developed, patterned after sample permission forms that would explain the nature of the project and be signed to indicate informed consent. However, when this was sent to Horizon for review before project implementation, feedback came back from the men via Richard Boone that the form was too much like a legal document and would likely scare off potential participants. Oral explanation and agreement was advised along with forms that had a fun, informal appearance. Oral explanations and agreement was also deemed sufficient protection of inmate rights by Templeton for program implementation at the jail.

As a consequence of this advice, clear statements were made emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation in the project program. At CCI these occurred as part of the one-on-one interviewing process before the program began. Interested participants were told they could think about it and make a decision about participation later. Since most men agreed to participate on the spot, they were given permission to change their minds after further consideration. At the jail, the explanations and opt-out notices occurred at the beginning of every class. In both venues all class activities and data collection methods were explained with a clearly specified choice to opt-out without any

negative judgment or consequence. Assurances were given that no one would be judged poorly if the opt-out choice was taken—it was “always okay to pass.” This attention to an ethical research approach was part of the effort to create a safe place to learn, share, and grow.

Monthly training sessions led by Templeton covered other ethical considerations involved when working with an inmate population. Informal training by Boone also provided guidance. For example, he established a policy of fist bump greetings vs. handshakes for female volunteers. Boone’s presence in the class during all sessions but the final one, when he provided a Horizon staff substitute, facilitated compliance with ethical practices.

Program Design

Circle of the Word is a Bible study for personal transformation. Its primary purpose is to provide an opportunity for spiritual growth and reformation of memory through internalization of biblical stories. The goal is an experience of spiritual empowerment. The strategy of internalization, as opposed to memorization, means to know a story well enough to tell it from the heart, because it is part of your own personal story. It means the ability to tell the story to someone else from start to finish without omitting something of major significance or adding something of major significance. To tell an internalized biblical story is not necessarily to tell it with word-for-word accuracy, but there should be some interpretive resemblance between the story told and the story recorded in the Bible. Internalization involves knowing something about the original meaning of the story as well as making connections with contemporary life. It is the fruit

of repeated hearing and telling, attention to narrative structure and details, and engagement of multiple intelligences. Each Circle of the Word session was designed with these considerations in mind.

A Circle of the Word session combines processes used in biblical storytelling workshops with processes used in the restorative justice practice of peacemaking circles. The peacemaking circle process provides an overall framework for the session, structures conversation on a topic, utilizes a talking piece, and establishes clear guidelines for participation. The ritualized process of agreeing to the guidelines forms a covenant group.

Biblical storytelling workshop processes are highly interactive, often playful, and make creative use of multiple intelligences. They include four basic components:

1. Learn the story—first its basics (setting, characters, plot), then specific words and phrases
2. Explore the story in its original context—understanding how the story would have been understood by audiences to whom it was first told by learning about keys words and concepts in it
3. Connect the story to contemporary life—relating dynamics of the story to one’s own lived experience
4. Tell the story—communicating through voice and gesture

Circle of the Word sessions often also include “Praying with the story” which focuses on the scripture as a conduit of relationship between God and people.

Two “homework” assignments functioned as distinctive elements of the program at the prison. Every week the men were given a one to two-page “Info Page” to read. These documents provided highly condensed material from the forthcoming commentary on Mark 14-16, *The Messiah of Peace* by Tom Boomersshine. The second assignment was a listing of suggested journaling activities. Journal activities were a mix of storylearning, storytelling, responses to the Info Page, prayer exercise, biblical study, and reflection on the stories. Journal entries were often reported at the beginning of a session.

The Circle session began by preparing the space. Chairs were rearranged in the jail from rows to a single circle. At the prison chairs were collected to form a circle. Then a round tablecloth was placed on the floor. On top of the tablecloth was placed a rectangular rainbow-colored, hand woven cloth. And on top of that was placed an imitation candle. Following the peacemaking circle structure which begins with some sort of opening activity, every session of Circle of the Word began in earnest with lighting the candle. The leader, called a “Circlekeeper,” then sang a short song, told the story, and spoke a prayer related to the story. At the jail the “Opening” was preceded by administrative functions such as signing the chaplain’s attendance form, making nametags, explaining the project and completing surveys. These functions were not necessary in the Circles led at the prison.

Following the Opening, the use and purpose of the talking piece was explained. A practice Check-In round asked participants to state their names and share how they are feeling today. The Circlekeeper always went first in these “rounds.” Next, the four guidelines were named and briefly described. The guidelines were always as follows:

1. Honor the talking piece
2. Speak from the heart
3. Listen from the heart
4. Respect confidentiality

A second round provided an opportunity for every participant, including the Circlekeeper, to agree with the guidelines. That completed the first part of the session.

Usually at CCI journal entries from the previous week would be shared in a round before moving on to the second part of the session which consisted of a series of storylearning exercises. Standard storylearning activities were: Repeat-After-Me, Word I Heard, Storyboard, Tell to a Partner, and Narrative Analysis. These were accompanied by

one or more supplementary activities such as, Sequence Pictures, Tell to Small Group, or Act It Out. The third part of the Circle was one or two rounds using the talking piece, where a dynamic of the story was explored in connection to the lived experience of participants. This was normally followed by a meditative telling of the story before the Closing. Closing included a Check-Out round, distribution of Journal Assignments and Info pages, and a gathering of all participants inside the Circle to stand and sing “Go Now in Peace” with American Sign Language signs for key words. At the prison the Encourager would offered a prayer before the song.

The prison program included elements not possible at the jail. The sixth session included a guest visit by Tom Boomersshine, author of the commentary used as the basis for the assigned Info Pages. At this session the men had an opportunity to ask Boomersshine questions about his commentary. The final session at CCI included an epic telling of Mark’s version of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Earlier sessions included planning and practicing for the epic. The final session also included a time of debriefing, both of the epic telling and of the entire program.

To assist with planning and post-session reflection, a scripted “design” was produced for each session. A distinct version of the design was produced for each of the three venues. The program was called “Sacred Stories” at the jail to distinguish it from another class named “Circles.” To be consistent, it was also named Sacred Stories at CCI. The certificate of completion identified it as “Biblical Storytelling 201” to give it an academic flair for the sake of any authorities who might review the certificate. The men, however, mainly called it “Ms. Amelia’s Bible Class.” The jail program was a series of individual classes with fluctuating membership. In contrast, the prison program was a

course offered as part of the Horizon curriculum. In this project report the program is referred to as “Circle of the Word” as well as “Sacred Stories.” Individual sessions or classes are sometimes called Circles, especially in the charts of the Results section.

Data Collection

The methodology of data collection differed for the two detention settings in which the project study was undertaken. This was because of institutional differences between the prison and jail contexts. The prison provided a stable group whose membership did not change during the project study. The jail group differed every week. The prison setting was within a year-long restorative program supporting course-like expectations (reading and writing in-between sessions). That setting also facilitated one-on-one time with participants outside scheduled program time, which was not possible in the jail.

Since different methods of data collection were used in the two settings, the methods for the prison and the jail will be discussed separately. For the most part, they will be identified by the name used on project documents. Their general context of administration will be explained first. Subsequently their content and specifics of administration will be described. In comparison to the two detention settings, at Grace Church much less data was collected and fewer data collection methods were used. This was because the primary focus was on the impact of the ministry model on incarcerated persons. Those methods that were used are listed below.

Methods Used at Chillicothe Correctional Institution

Before the program began, each interested participant was given an instrument to complete, the **Goals Scale**. He then came into the Horizon Coordinator's office where the researcher interviewed him, using the **Sacred Stories Course Survey** to serve as a basis for discussion as well as an instrument to gain basic data. Important goals of the interview session were to establish a relationship, build trust, review the course syllabus, explain the project and the choice to opt out of participation, and assure confidentiality.

Goals Scale—A focus of the “Breath of Fresh Air” project was whether or not a Circle of the Word program would increase hopeful thinking among incarcerated individuals. Accordingly, an initial idea was to administer an existing instrument called a “Goals Scale”⁶ both before and after the program at the prison. This six-question Likert-type scale was administered preceding the initial interview of CCI participants. Contrary to initial intent, the Goals Scale was not administered in the final interview. This was because: (1) the scale did not seem appropriate for a prison setting,⁷ (2) the conceptualization of the project had shifted from experimentation to exploration, and (3) other instruments were developed by the researcher and there was a desire to avoid instrument overload for the participants. The purpose of using the Goals Scale was to learn about the participants rather than to serve as a pretest for an intervention.

⁶ C.R. Snyder, *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2000), 76-77. Snyder initially called this instrument the “Adult Hope Scale” but changed the name after initial use when he found that some people get distracted by the notion of measuring hope and discussed that rather than taking the scale.

⁷ Some members of the project's context group had serious reservations about its use with inmates. Feedback from inmate mentors about how written materials were likely to be received also discouraged follow-up use of this instrument.

Sacred Stories Course Survey—The Sacred Stories Course Survey was a form developed for this project by the researcher to gain basic data about the participant’s age, religious background, spiritual practice, biblical and storytelling experience, and course goals. In keeping with advice from inmate mentors to make forms non-threatening and fun, this and subsequent forms used relevant icons instead of numbers for rating purposes. This form was adapted for use at the jail. A similar instrument was administered in a post-course interview.

Data collection methods used during the eight weeks of program implementation included an attendance page and a **Check-In/Check-Out** activity in class which was charted. **Journaling** assignments were completed outside class time in a composition book provided by the Horizon Initiative. Participants also completed a **Feedback on Class Survey** with a rating scale and space for written comments. Written and verbal observations were made by the Encourager and the researcher. Some class activities had charted or otherwise written responses, for instance the “Word I Heard” activity (naming a word or phrase heard while listening to the story told with closed eyes). Some of this information was combined on a weekly **Report on Session**; some was transferred from chart paper to separate documents, as for example the group evaluation of the epic telling and course impact.

Check-In/Check-Out—Check-In and Check-Out are both standard peacemaking circle processes. Participants are asked to tell how they are feeling in a word or phrase at the beginning and again at the end of the session. This was recorded on chart paper, usually by the inmate mentor, and transferred to a weekly report by the researcher.

Journaling—Every week participants were given a journaling assignment listing several activities to be completed during the week. During some sessions participants reported on their journaling. Journals were collected, copied, and read by the researcher at the end of the course. They were reviewed with participants during the post-course, one-on-one interviews.

Feedback on Class Survey—This instrument was developed to rate and comment on nine frequently used learning activities in the weekly sessions. It also asked for rating and comments regarding overall enjoyment of that day’s class and the degree to which the class “strengthened my spirit” and “increased my hopefulness.” The rating was a five-point scale. The survey was administered during the sixth session.

Report on Session—Reports differed somewhat from week to week, depending on what data was gathered from the various activities. Most reports included the number of participants, Check-In/Check-Out words, familiarity with the story of the day, notes about participation and responses to group activities.

Two weeks after the final CCI class session one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant. Immediately preceding their interview each man completed three instruments, including the same **Sacred Stories Course Survey** which they took before the course began. The other two instruments were an **Activities Survey** and a **Course Experience Survey**. The Encourager who had been present in each class session administered these instruments and facilitated the interviews. As a full participant in the course, at his own initiative he also took the surveys and was interviewed.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher in the Horizon Coordinator’s office. Boone was present for security purposes, but not part of the conversation. He worked at

his computer during the interviews. An **Interview Questions for Participants** form was completed using written questions as a guide to discussion. Additional questions were asked orally of each participant. The second part of the interview was a review of the participant's journal where pre-identified sections were highlighted. The focus was to clarify things the researcher did not understand, to answer questions asked in the journal, to affirm particular parts of the journal, and to ask whether or not it would be okay to quote from the journal.

Activities Survey—This instrument asks participants to rate fifteen course activities on a five-point scale. Simple face icons were used instead of numbers. This design gave the scale a friendly, non-institutional feel. It also eliminated the problem that happened with one participant using a numbered scale: reversing the value order so that “1” referred to the highest rather than to the lowest value. There was no space given for write-in comments, but a few of the men wrote comments anyway.

Course Experience Survey—This scale did use numbers (1-5), asking participants to rate ten potential components of their experience of the Sacred Stories course. The components were all positive outcomes the program might achieve. This instrument was designed to determine whether or not the initiating hunch of this project was accurate. The second part of this instrument was intended to gain insight into how participants perceived the course by asking, “How would you describe this course to your friends or family?”

Interview Questions for Participants—This form consisted of five general questions about the course and asked the participant to answer in relation to their own experience of it. The questions were as follows:

1. What was the best part of this course for you?
2. What was the most problematic part of this course for you?
3. How does this course compare to other Bible studies you have had?
4. What value do you think this course has for people who are incarcerated?
5. What difference does it make in your life to know the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection?

Four additional questions, not on the form, were asked of each participant:

6. What did you think about using a talking piece?
7. What did you think about identifying story elements?
8. Was there something you would have liked to do more of?
9. Was there something you would have preferred to do less of?

Answers to these questions were written on the back of the form. Since class duration was an obvious issue, many participants were also asked their opinion about length of class, breaks, etc.

Six **Interview Questions for Horizon Coordinator** were emailed to the Horizon Initiative Coordinator in the month following the participants' interviews. He responded with written answers to the following questions:

1. What is your impression of the response to this program by the men who participated?
2. What do you identify as values or benefits of this program for the participants?
3. In what way does this program relate to the goals of the Horizon Initiative?
4. What feedback did you get from participants in this program?
5. What is the character of Bible studies and/or spiritual growth classes common in prison settings and how does this program compare to them?
6. Other comments or suggestions?

The Coordinator had also evaluated the Fall program which served as a feasibility study for the project ministry model. That evaluation is included in the data for this project.

Data Collection Methods Used at Montgomery County Jail

Jail terms are much shorter than prison terms. Court dates and visitors interrupt programming. Every class session at MCJ had a different group configuration. There were always new participants and always participants from the previous week who were not present in subsequent ones. Due to the lack of group stability no attempt was made to administer instruments or hold interviews before or after the program. Data collection from participants was confined to class time.

With the chaplain's consent two surveys were developed and administered at the beginning of every class session following a brief explanation of the doctoral program and research project, the voluntary nature of filling out a survey, and assurance of confidentiality. The first time a woman attended the class she was given the survey for **First Attendance of Sacred Stories Class** form. This form captured data on age, faith tradition, spiritual practices, experience of the Bible, familiarity with the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, biblical storytelling experience, perceived ability to tell a biblical story to someone, and goal for class attendance. Icons were used to create an interesting and user-friendly presentation. Most of the items were closed questions; a few were short answer. Women who attended more than once received a survey for **Returning Sacred Stories Participants** form. It asked about spiritual practices, engagement with the previous week's story during the intervening time, and a biblical story or person that comes to mind; also, it included a box for comments.

Other regular data collected during class was similar to what was collected at CCI: attendance records tracking total in attendance and number of returning participants, Check-In/Check-Out responses, familiarity with the story, and Word I Heard responses.

This data was captured on small charts and transcribed in **weekly reports** as were used with CCI. Also included in these reports were observation notes about participation from the researcher or from post-class debriefing with assistant leaders. During the last session a **Feedback on Class Survey** was administered, similar to the one given at CCI.

Within a month following the eight-week program the three Grace Church members who had participated in class sessions as assistant leaders met with the researcher to evaluate the program. A questionnaire form was developed with interview questions for assistant Circlekeepers called **Evaluation of Sacred Stories Program at MCJ**. Each assistant completed this form during the meeting. It asked the following questions:

1. What previous experience do you have with people who are incarcerated? Have you been inside a jail or prison before?
2. How was this program for you? Were there any surprises? Did you learn anything?
3. What value would you say doing this program has for church members?
4. What is your general impression of the response to this program by the women who participated?
5. What do you identify as values or benefits of this program for the participants?
6. In what way does this program relate to the mission and ministry of the church?

When the assistants finished writing the group discussed their responses and reflected on the program experience. There was also discussion about the advisability of establishing on on-going ministry with incarcerated persons at Grace Church. The audio of this discussion was digitally recorded.

The chaplain of the jail was interviewed two days after the assistant leaders. The following **Interview Questions for Chaplain** were emailed to the chaplain prior to the scheduled face-to-face interview:

1. In your experience, how do most people encounter Scripture in jail?
2. What is the character of Bible study classes common in prison settings?

3. Regarding the Sacred Stories program this Spring, what is your impression of the response to this program by the women who participated?
4. What feedback did you get from participants in this program?
5. What do you identify as values or benefits of this program for the participants?
6. In what way does this program relate to your goals as Chaplain?

The interview took place in the chaplain's office. The researcher asked the questions on the form, noting responses, and occasionally asking impromptu follow-up questions. The chaplain's responses were noted on the questionnaire by the researcher. The conversation was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Data Collection Methods Used at Grace United Methodist Church

A session design was generated for each class session at Grace. Following the second session, observations about specific activities were noted. A class survey was completed by those who attended the first class session. This anonymous survey was the same one given at both the prison and the jail. The number of participants was recorded each week on a "Report on Session" along with observation comments, Check-In words, and whatever other data was captured during the session on chart paper, including responses to a "Feedback on the Program" exercise in the last class.

Data Analysis

Procedures

There were two primary purposes for the data collection with program participants. The first was to learn what kind of people were motivated to sign up for the program—basic information like age, religious affiliation, spiritual practices, experience with the Bible, and goals for participation. The second was to see what their response

would be to the program and its component activities. The instruments developed succeeded in getting both kinds of information, but only the second type was analyzed for purposes of this project report. Results of data analysis will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The building of trust between researcher and participants is an important aspect of transformational research theory. The data collection exercises with participants formed a positive relationship of mutual trust and respect between participants and the researcher. There was never any sign of resistance to data collection methods in either setting. On the contrary, both the men and women conveyed that they were glad to cooperate with a research project in this way. The ninth Circle at the jail was not at the time intended to be part of the project. For this reason no survey was distributed for completion at the beginning as had been our custom. The women asked, “Aren’t we going to do a survey?” A professional consultant, Mary Hallinan, who also leads programs in the jail has observed that the women like being part of something bigger than themselves.

This attitude was expressed directly by more than one participant in the prison as well. One of the classes toward the end of the program at CCI included a discussion on what the men perceived as values of their participation. One man responded, “to be here to help Ms. Amelia out with her thesis.” In the interviews, when asked if the contents of their journals could be shared, all the men readily gave permission. More than once a man would say that if anything he did by participating in the course could help others, he would be glad.

What was it about the way in which data was collected that contributed to building a trusting relationship? The identification of contributing factors is largely a

speculative exercise, since participants were not directly asked, but an educated guess will be offered based on intuition as well as learning from those experienced working with inmates. The attitude demonstrated in explaining and/or conducting data collection was non-judgmental, transparent, and genuine. Things were explained simply and forthrightly. Authentic interest in responses was communicated, if by no other means than simply by writing them down on a chart.

Opinions and suggestions were requested and valued. One week a woman in the jail suggested having clipboards to facilitate drawing. This idea was implemented in subsequent classes. Measurements were designed to be visually appealing, easy to understand, and non-threatening. For example, most surveys included icons instead of words for choices, and another set of icons instead of numbers for a rating scale. Appreciation for participation was regularly expressed. Perhaps most importantly, participation was voluntary and not taken for granted.

While collecting data was relatively easy, managing it was an on-going challenge involving a significant learning curve and a lot of time. It required daunting organizational skill. An assistant helped capture data from index cards, charts, and survey forms to create digitized reports and other Microsoft Word® documents. The survey and interview data was entered into Microsoft Excel® spreadsheets. Journal entries, interview notes and audio recordings were transcribed.

As advised by experts on qualitative research, software programs have been developed to collect, code, and present qualitative data. These are called CAQDAS for

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software.⁸ MAXQDA® was chosen to assist with these tasks and an introductory level of skill using the software was acquired. Unfortunately this was not done until after project completion, hampering effective use of the software. Nevertheless, the initial efforts to use MAXQDA® have made its potential obvious and did facilitate data analysis for the “Breath of Fresh Air” project. It was used to gather data in one place, code it, create a visual display, and transcribe an audio interview. To assist with analysis of quantitative data this project employed Microsoft Excel®. All but one of the graphs for visual display of data was generated in Excel®.

The primary question that the “Breath of Fresh Air” project was designed to explore was whether or not a program integrating peacemaking circle processes into a biblical storytelling workshop would make a positive difference in the lives of incarcerated men and women. The basic analytical task was then to determine if there was evidence that a Circle of the Word program made a positive difference in the lives of men incarcerated at CCI and women incarcerated at MCJ. The data was analyzed with a view to answering eight questions regarding participant response, one regarding observations by institutional leadership (Horizon Coordinator and MCJ Chaplain), and one regarding input from outside observers (church members who assisted with the jail program). A secondary goal of the project was to explore local church involvement in the ministry model. The final two questions address this goal. This is the list of questions:

1. How did incarcerated individuals respond to the program as a whole?
2. How did incarcerated individuals respond to specific elements of the program?
3. What improvements were suggested by participants?

⁸ Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. 3 (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014), 47.

4. Did they choose to participate and/or recommend the program to others?
5. What benefits did they perceive in participation?
6. To what extent was internalizing the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection a source of hope?
7. What other dynamics would the experience of learning these particular stories by heart have on participants?
8. Did participants do the work to learn scripture by heart; did they tell the stories out loud to other people?
9. How was the project perceived by the institutional leadership?
10. How was the project perceived by outside observers?
11. Was it possible to build a local church ministry into the model?
12. What was the impact of the program on the congregation?

These questions guided the selection of data for analysis. Not all of the data captured was involved in the analytical process. Criteria for selection was that the data directly related to one or more of the above questions and that it was manageable to analyze within the given time constraints. The questions were formulated as codes in MAXQDA® as the backbone of the coding process.

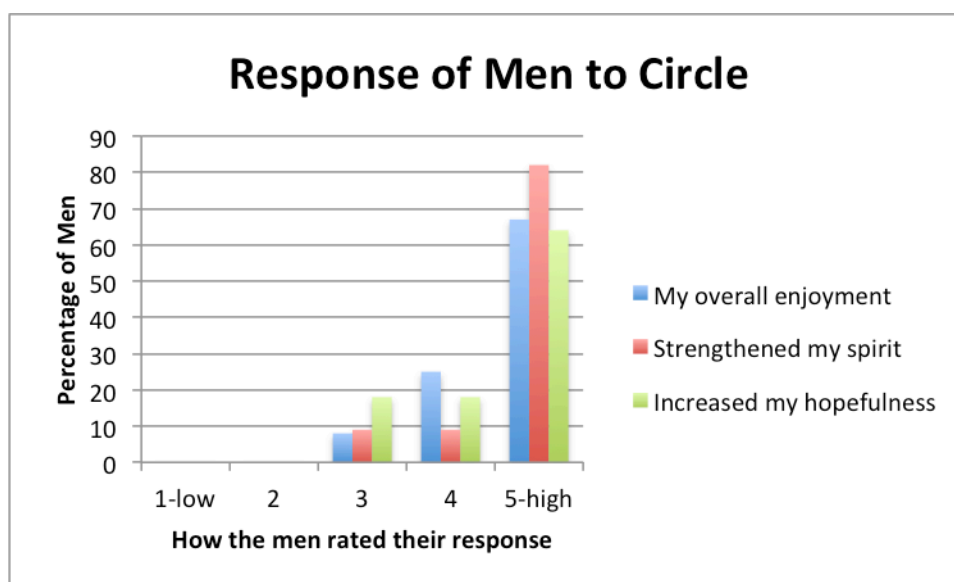
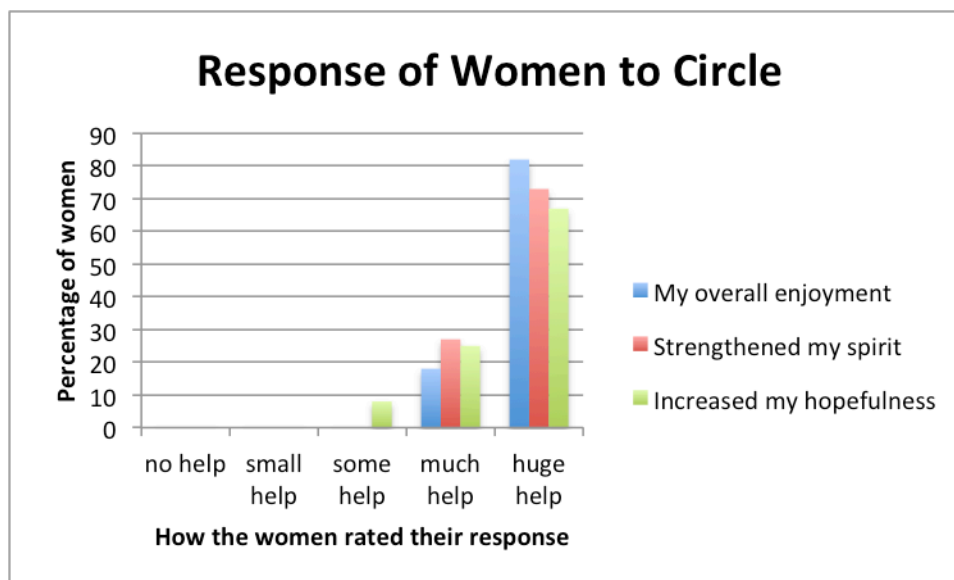
Much of the qualitative data had been captured in Microsoft Word® documents. These were imported into MAXQDA® and then coded. The coding process was a dynamic one. While the questions above started the process and continued as its backbone, analysis of the data resulted in the creation of subcodes, additional primary codes, and revisions of that first set. Changes to the code system necessitated a return to previously coded documents for fine-tuning. The process of qualitative coding also revealed categories of data analysis and further research to do in the future. As these were identified “memos” were created and added to the MAXQDA® project file.

Qualitative data captured on surveys had been entered into spreadsheets along with quantitative data. When these spreadsheets were imported into MAXQDA® codes were automatically generated. It was soon evident that this was a cumbersome method for analyzing qualitative data, especially given the researcher's limited knowledge of the

MAXQDA® software program. Therefore, after the questions listed above were entered as codes, the codes generated by the spreadsheets were integrated as subcodes and the associated qualitative data was transferred to Microsoft Word® documents. Quantitative data that had been entered into Microsoft Excel® spreadsheets was analyzed in frequency tables generated in Excel®. These tables were then configured as column charts for graphic presentation, also created in Excel®. The one exception to this process was the data from MCJ Returning Participants surveys on the degree of their engagement with the previous week's story. This data was configured in Microsoft Excel® in such a way that it could be imported into MAXQDA® and generate a horizontal bar chart. However, it was a time-consuming and frustrating process that was dropped in favor of using Microsoft Excel® to create visual displays of data.

Results

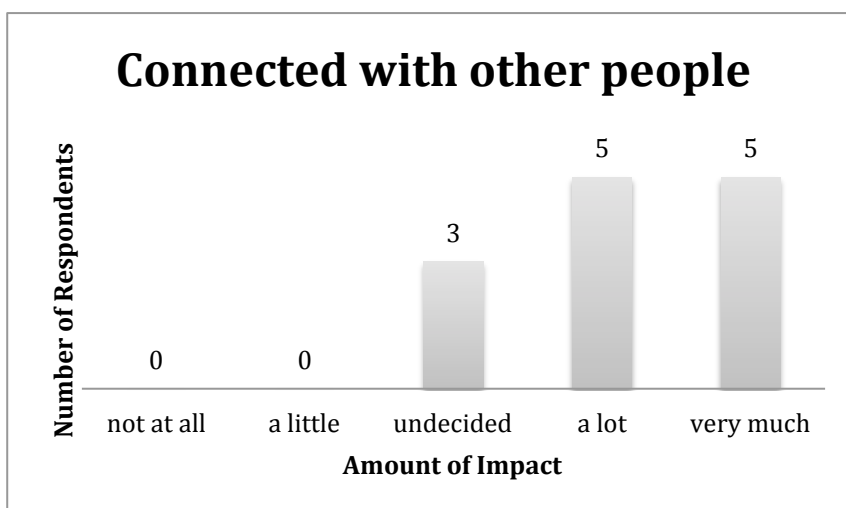
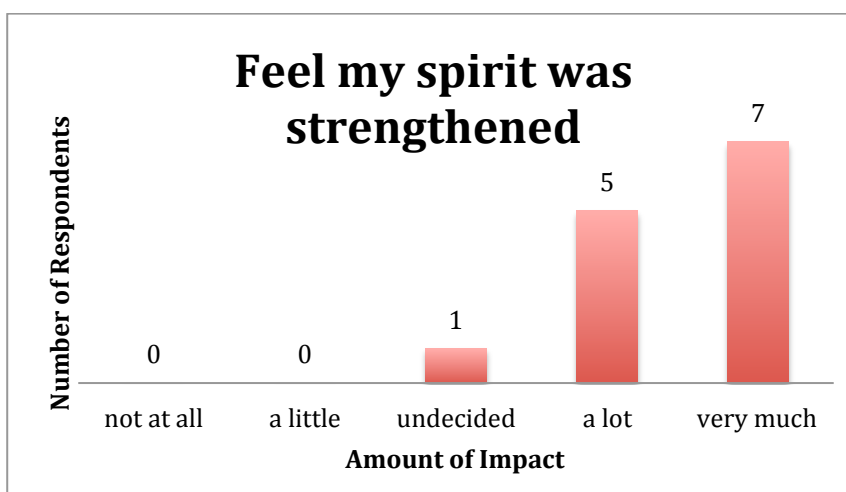
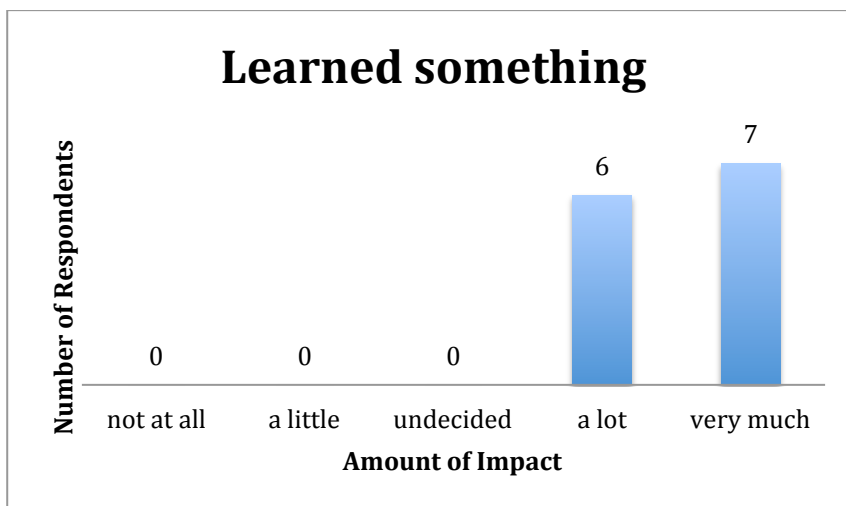
The data unambiguously shows that participant response to the “Breath of Fresh Air” ministry model was extremely positive. At the end of Session Six for the men and Session Eight for the women, participants were invited to evaluate their experience of that day's Circle. They rated specific activities as well as overall response. They were asked about their overall enjoyment of the Circle and the degree to which it strengthened their spirit and increased their hopefulness. Both groups indicated high levels of positive response. No one rated their experience in the two lowest brackets. The majority of both men and women rated their experience in the highest bracket. The following charts display these results:

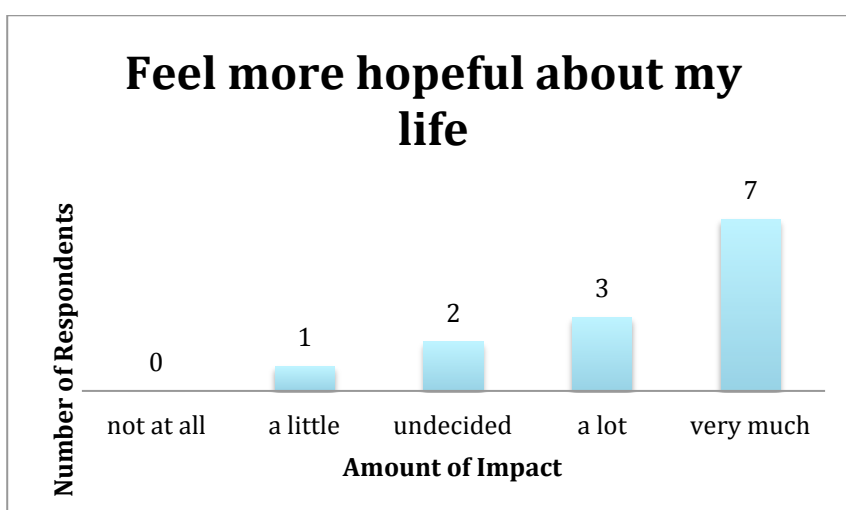
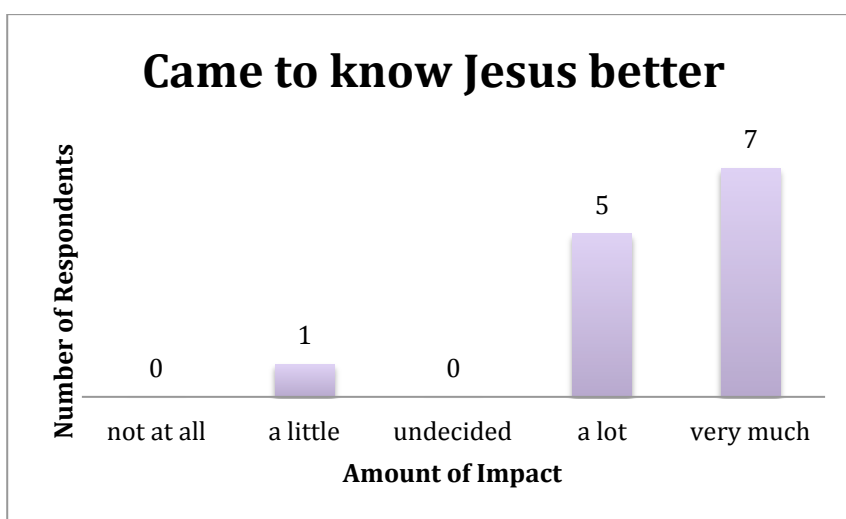
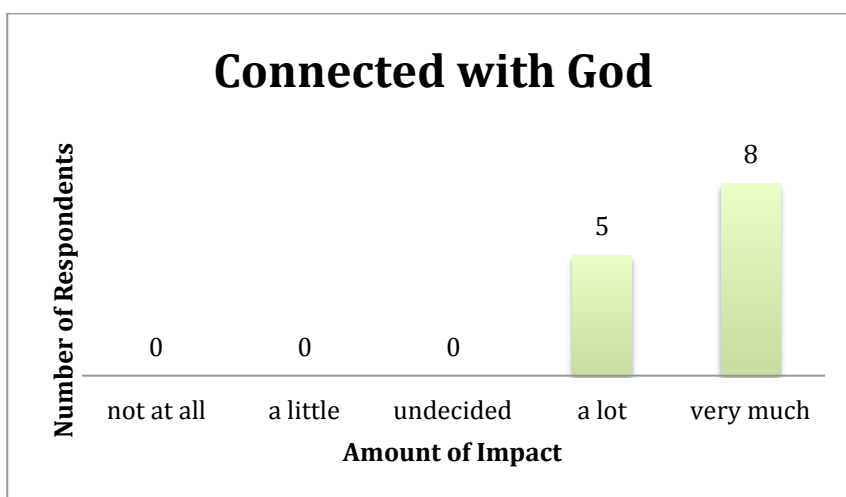


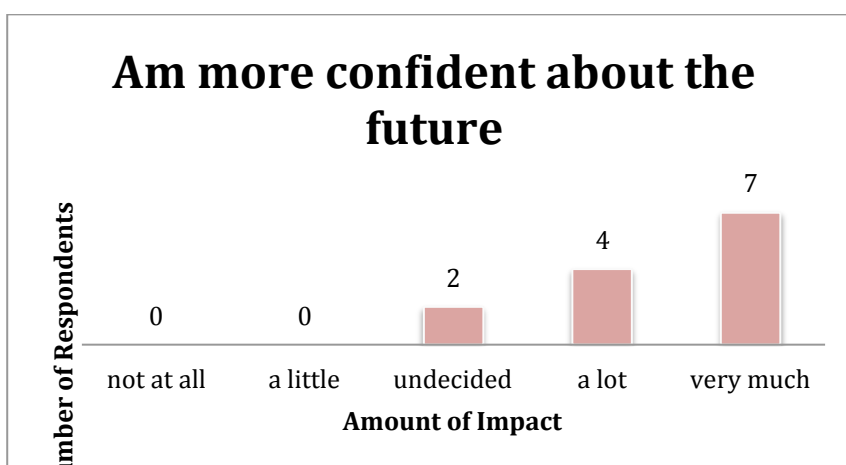
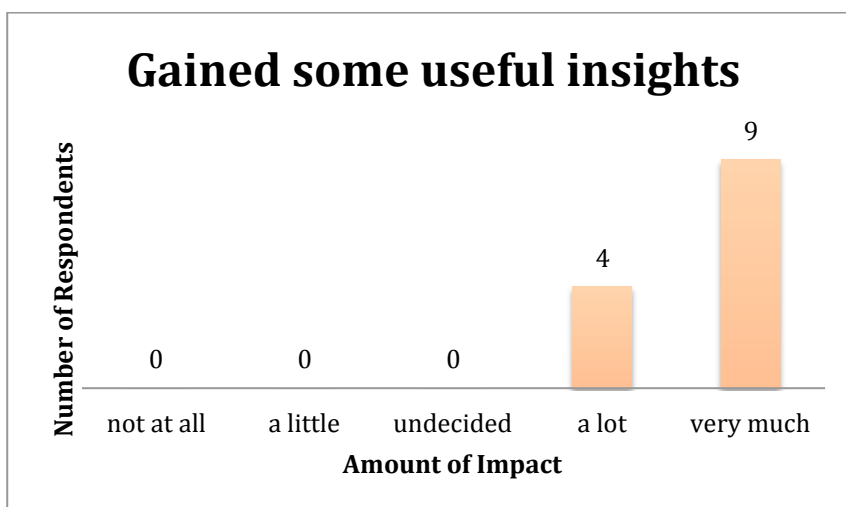
The results of this survey indicate a highly favorable response to the program.

As part of the “closing interview” following the eight-week program of Circles the men completed a survey designed to help them reflect on and communicate their experience of the course. The following charts report the results of that survey for each of the nine categories or response to the program. They are displayed in the order as listed on the survey. Each category finishes the sentence:

As a result of this course I...







The results of this survey also indicate a highly favorable response to the program. In every category but one, the highest rating was designated by a majority of participants. The sole exception (“connected with other people”) evenly distributed the highest and second highest ratings for a strong majority of favorable replies.

Results of the qualitative data reinforced these positive responses to the program by its participants. Many commented on how it had helped them learn the stories and their details and how it had given them “tools” to do so. It had motivated them to “get back to the Bible and start reading it again.” It was described as fun, entertaining, energetic, interactive, unique, and enlightening. They enjoyed and appreciated the amount of time they spent on each story, “taking it slow” and really learning it, in contrast to “when you read the chapter you don’t really understand.” Both the men and the participants in the Grace Sunday school class commented on how the biblical storytelling approach helped them know familiar stories in detail, in depth.

Another named benefit was increasing their “spiritual knowledge” and the way in which the course “helped me understand and connect with the passion of Christ and each person involved in his life.” The men identified a community formation aspect of the program in naming benefits such as “spiritual bonding with the group,” “everyone telling a story, one body working together toward a common goal led to a sense of unity,” and “being in a place with brothers in Christ that I trust enough to open up and share the Word of Christ.” The comment, “Being able to be a part of this class was a benefit to me” was a simple, straightforward witness to the sense of belonging which the program had accomplished.

The men gained confidence in their own ability to remember and tell a story. Several men commented on how they had used, or intended to use, what they had learned in the course to tell and teach stories to their children and grandchildren. One said, “I can teach the stories to my twin daughters, in both a serious way and a fun way.” A particularly poignant response to the course from one of the men articulated how he perceived the program in relation to hope: “It’s a wonderful experience to have, and it allows you to come in touch with the realness of your heart’s feelings and desires for your journey in life.” Another named benefit related to hopeful thinking: “It helped define my purpose.” The responses to the program from the men were varied, meaningful, and positive.

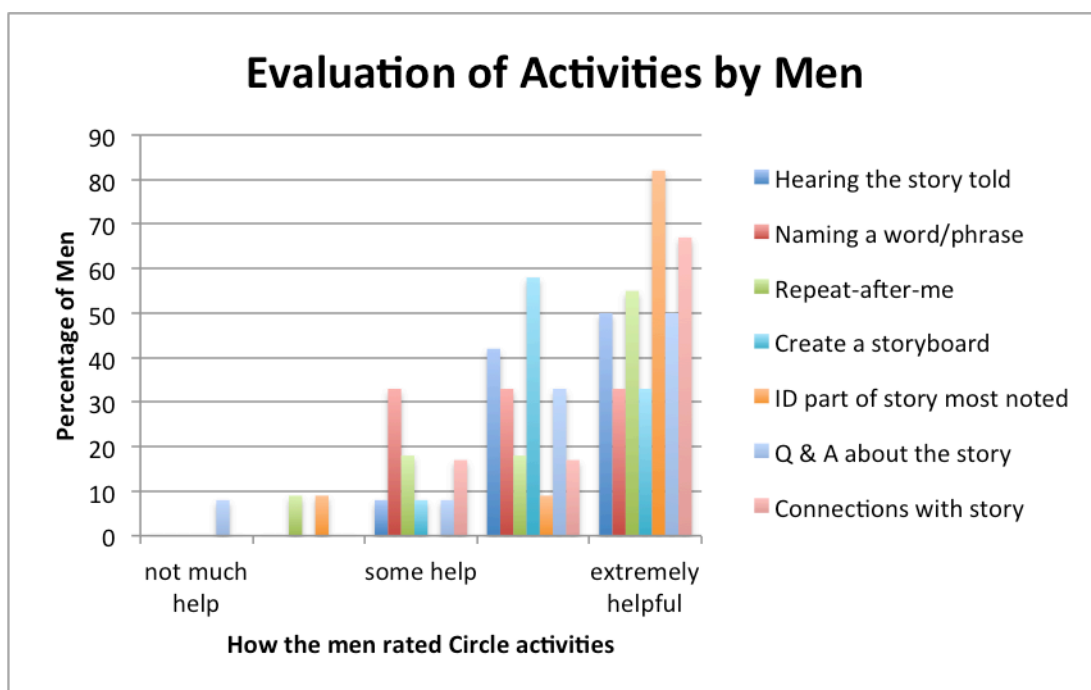
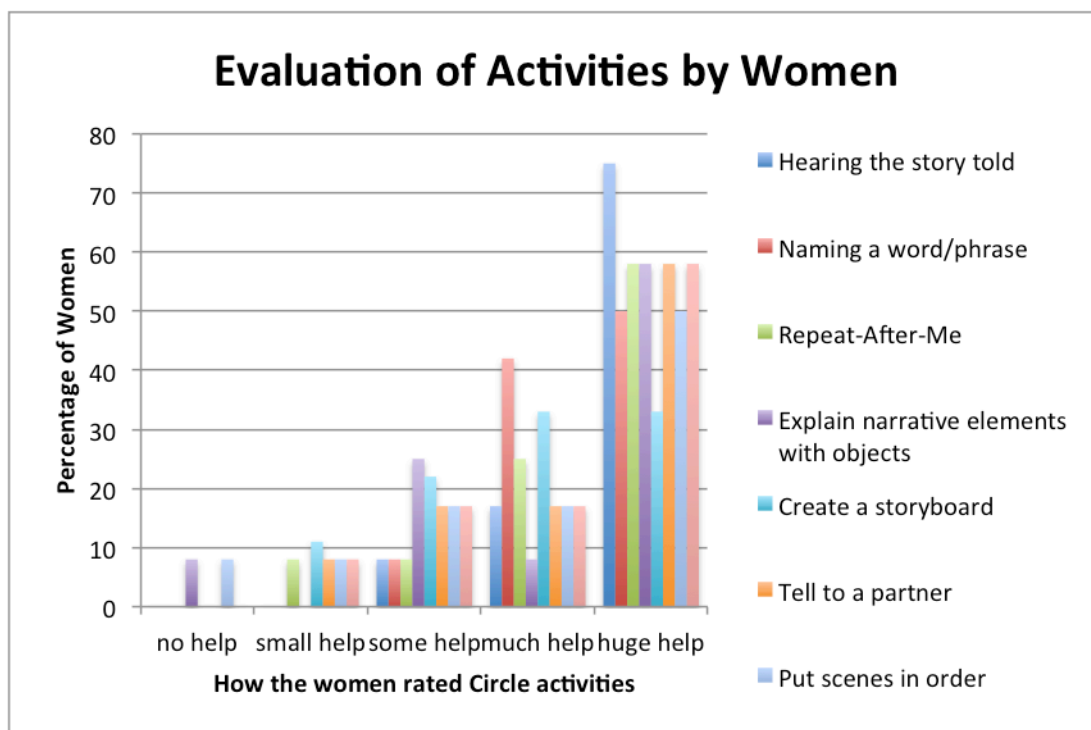
One negative response to the program was reported by Chaplain Templeton of MCJ. He reported that one woman felt the Circle activities were too “kindergarten” and while she thought it was okay for others, it was not for her. Going into the project it was anticipated this might be a response, especially from the men. The researcher was sensitive to this possibility and concerned about insulting adults who are sometimes treated like children in negative ways. For this reason she did not begin with the customary introduction to a biblical storytelling workshop: the Lion Hunt. After a couple of sessions the Encourager reprimanded her for omitting this activity which had been done in the feasibility study that he had attended. So the next Circle included the Lion Hunt. It was well received and referenced as something “liked best” in the closing interviews.

The nature of some Circle activities was named by one man as “pre-school.” However this was descriptive, not derogatory, and was said in a context of appreciation.

An example of the general attitude was conveyed by the Encourager who said the class was “A must take! Your inner ‘child’ and inner spiritual man will be enlightened.” This recommendation was a strong endorsement from an influential leader.

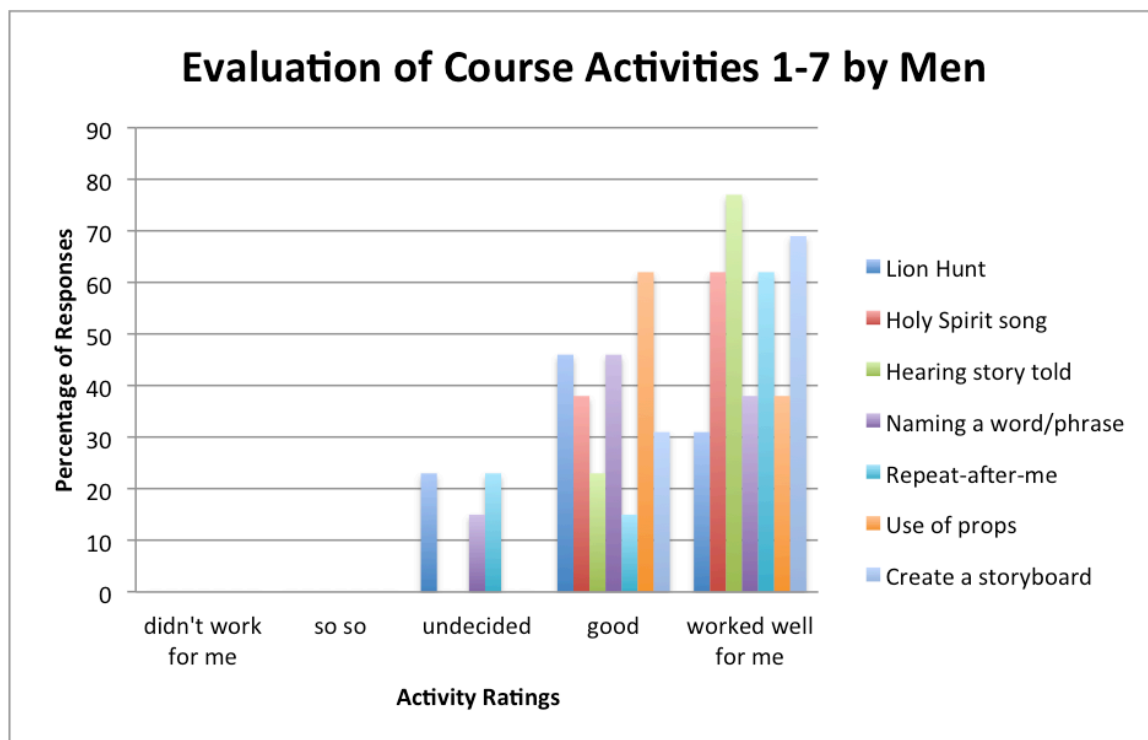
Women who attended Circle multiple times expressed their response in comments such as “I enjoy coming to this class; everyone is nice,” I’ve enjoyed this class very much—thanks for coming,” I really like this class, look forward to coming every week,” “I’m very thankful for this class,” and simply “I love class.” Sometimes the women were asked to give feedback at the end of a class. A common report was finding the story meaningful. Many said they were glad to “be here.” Others mentioned specific activities, the candle, learning about Jesus or the Bible, and relating to other people. One woman’s poetic response inspired the project title: “This time is like a breath of fresh air.”

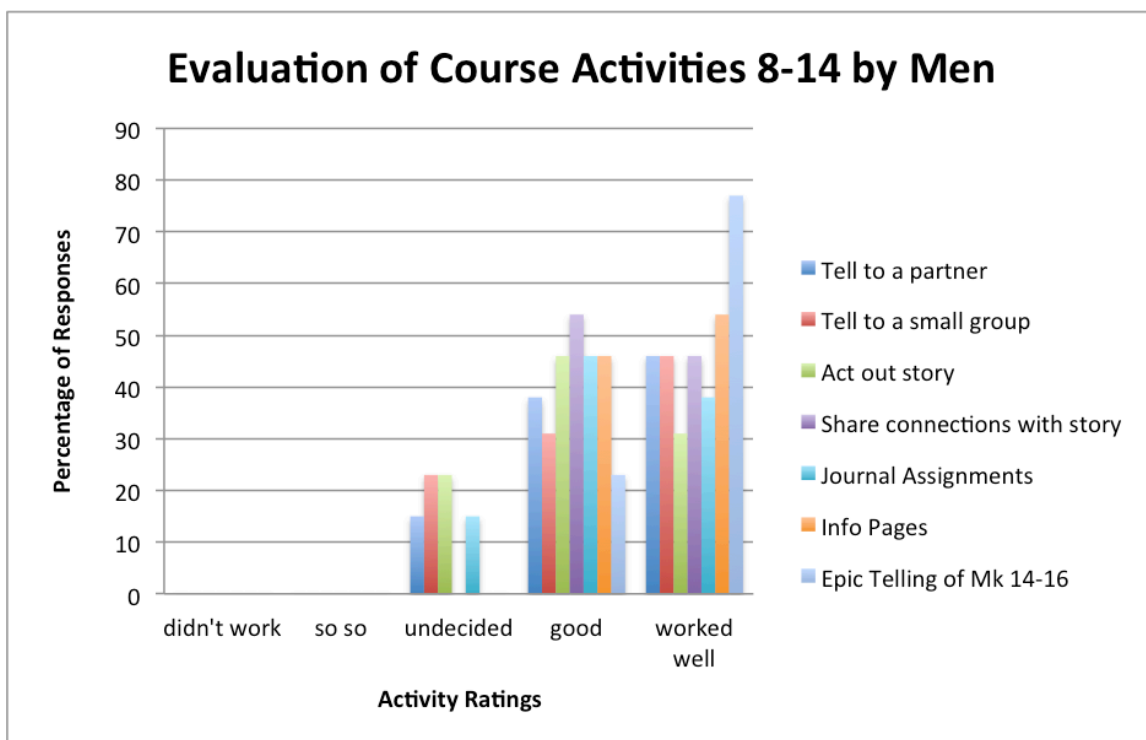
The survey that asked the women and men to rate their overall response to a particular Circle also asked about seven activities experienced in Circle that day. The question they were asked with regard to each question was, “How helpful was this activity to you in learning today’s story?” The two groups engaged in some of the same activities, while others differed. Below are the results:



In addition to this assessment of response to specific elements of the program for a particular Circle experience, the men completed a more comprehensive survey two weeks after completion of the course. On this survey they rated fourteen elements by

circling the face “that best represents your experience.” The face icons represented responses ranging from “Didn’t work for me at all” to “Worked well for me” as indicated on the survey. Results are displayed in the two following charts:





Once again the responses are heavily weighted on the positive side.

It is interesting to note that the two highest ratings were awarded to “Hearing the story told” and “Epic Telling of Mk 14-16.” “Hearing the story told” referred to the initial telling of the story by the Circlekeeper as the Opening of each Circle. “Epic Telling of Mk 14-16” referred to the ensemble telling of the Passion Death and Resurrection narrative by the men and the Circlekeeper during the final session at CCI. Afterwards on that day one man wrote in his journal:

It was fun. I can't believe we remembered it all to the end. I did not write in this journal very much. But I loved this class and learned a lot. I thank you for your time and everything you did for us.

The face-to-face hearing and telling of this central story of the Christian faith was highly valued by this group of incarcerated men.

Qualitative data emphasized overall enthusiasm for the activities and pinpointed activities that were particularly appreciated. It did not uncover any unpopular activity.

There was never a sense of resistance to any activity during a Circle session with either the women or the men (which was not the case with the Grace Sunday school class). Observers did not report negative responses afterwards. No element of the program received poor reviews in the interviews.

At the closing of one class at the jail a feedback activity charted what the women liked about the class and their suggestions for improvement. The only suggestion they offered was to “have a scribe” other than the researcher. This suggestion was implemented for the remainder of the project. Another suggestion that was made (in a post-project Circle) was to give the women folders for collecting their stories. This, also, was implemented for women who return to attend a second class.

Near the beginning of the post-course interview the men were asked if there was anything problematic about the course from their point of view. Toward the end of the interview they were asked if there was an element of the course they would have preferred to do “more of” or any they would have preferred to do “less of.” Several men expressed a preference for more information about the stories and their historical context. Two men thought there should be more tellings to the whole group (one suggested an epic telling every week!) and two others would like more drawings. One man suggested more use of the wooden figures and another would have liked more discussion.

There was always a sense of being rushed in the CCI sessions so the men were asked for their opinions and suggestions about duration. All but one man thought more time should be allotted (two hours), but that there would need to be a break. More movement was suggested to help keep people alert. One man suggested a morning class to avoid the post-lunch sleepy syndrome. Since no one seemed to want to give up any

element of the program, and in fact wanted more of a number of activities, the necessity for additional time seems clear.

The Sacred Stories program was an elective activity at both the prison and the jail so attendance was a simple way to access inmate response. Taking attendance became an unnecessary task at the prison because nearly everyone came every time. There were 13 participants, including the Encourager. A man who was absent for the second session confessed the next week that he had simply forgotten and he apologized. That was his only absence. The group was clear to explain any absence such as, “So and so had a dentist appointment.” The Encourager made a point of explaining that if the men didn’t find the program meaningful and enjoyable, they would not come. This information negated the researcher’s assumption that the near-perfect attendance was the result of the men feeling obliged to attend once they signed up.

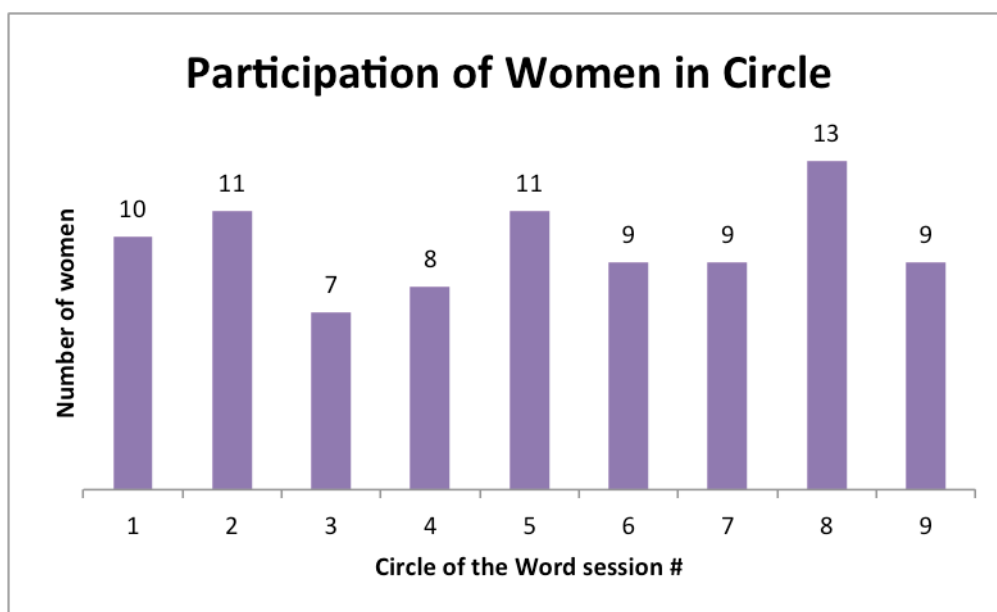
Attendance at CCI remained high even when there were strong forces working against it. During the third session there was suddenly a lot of commotion in the hallway—intermittent cheering which went on throughout the session. Here is the report from the researchers audio notes:

All thirteen men were present and all thirteen stayed for the duration of the class. It was only after we cleared the room that I learned the commotion was cheering during a basketball game between Ohio State University and the University of Dayton. It was a March Madness game of major import for basketball fans in Ohio. On top of that, it was a close game decided in the last four seconds: UD 60, OSU 59. The men in our Circle had missed it without any sign of agitation. They actually seemed less distracted than I was. On reflection, I was very impressed and told them so the next week. We did a round for everyone to name who they wanted to win. One man really didn’t care. The others sure did. I was the only one rooting for the Dayton Flyers.

The men apparently valued their time in “Ms. Amelia’s Bible Class.”

A dynamic related to attendance is session duration. The men were always fine with continuing class well beyond the norm. Occasionally some had to leave early for their jobs or other commitments. In planning for the feasibility study, the Horizon Coordinator said that classes usually lasted an hour and that the men got restless if they went longer. He was willing to try a longer class session so the test program was designed with ninety-minute sessions and the project program followed suit. The men did not complain about this longer duration. On the contrary, most agreed that two hours would be best as long as there was a short break. In contrast, the church program was constrained by the Sunday School format of 45 minutes. This was not enough time to do any significant internalizing of the stories at the church. It definitely would not be sufficient time for significant engagement with scripture by heart in a detention setting.

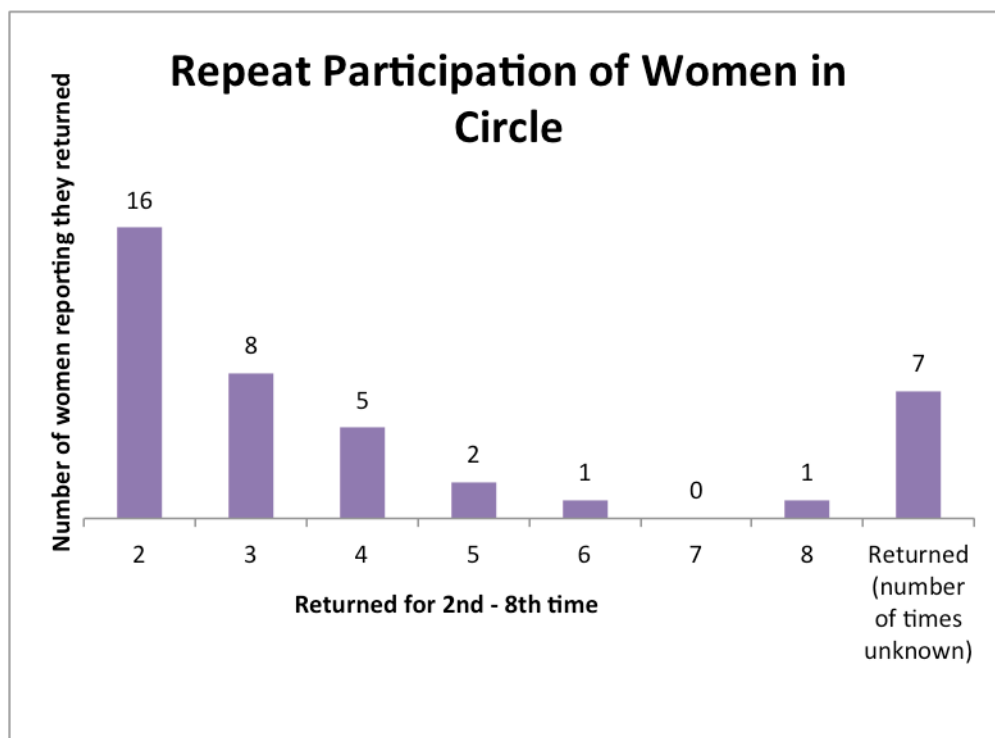
The cap on Circle attendance at both the prison and the jail was twelve. There was one more in the prison because the Encourager functioned as a class participant as well as a mentor to both the men and the researcher. Below is a chart of attendance at the jail:



In the jail, attendance in a class is directly related to participant recommendation of that class. Participant recommendation is the only way women find out about programs. It is the only source of publicity. Templeton cited attendance as the chief indicator he uses to assess a program's success. He tracks the data. Women are required to record their presence at the beginning of each class on a form that is returned to him. The following transcript from a post-project interview with Templeton (conducted on July 18, 2014) narrates these dynamics with regard to the Sacred Stories program:

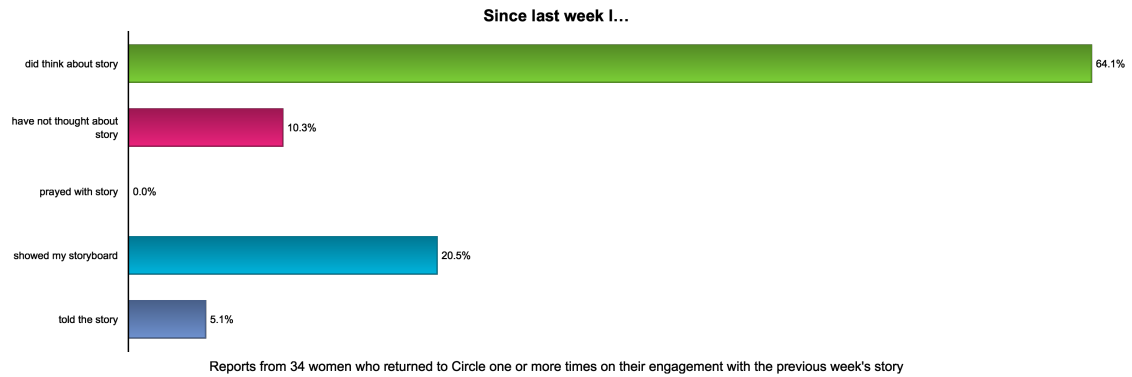
I think that the program itself is doing very well. As I've said on numerous occasions, the best advertisement is word of mouth. I can put twenty people in a class, on a class list, and four people show up. Now something's wrong with that picture if that's the consistent thing. But when you have, like for instance your class—I don't put any more than twelve people in your class, so I look for anywhere from eight to ten people on a consistent basis. If I get everybody I'm like wow, yes! But most times I'm not going to get everybody because somebody may have gotten released, somebody had a visit, any number of reasons come up. Very seldom do I get somebody who refuses: "I don't want to go; I'd rather sit here in a cell." So, I look at Sacred Stories as a success because even during the break I'm still getting kites asking, "Hey, I wanna go to the Wednesday Bible class; I want to go to the Sacred Stories class."

During the interview, Templeton explained that he looks not only at the numbers who attend class, but also at how many women return: "If they go again, that let's us know they like it." The following graph displays return rates according to the Returning Participant Survey:



Specific data on how many returned how many times was only partially captured by the Returning Participants Survey. Forty women attended more than once; data was only captured for thirty-three. A better method for collecting such data has been developed since the project that tracks exactly who comes which weeks. However, the project data is sufficient to indicate that a significant number of women did attend Sacred Stories multiple times, thus satisfying that criteria for a successful program.

The Returning Participants Survey included questions designed to assess the level of engagement of women with the stories between sessions as one way of ascertaining whether or not learning them was a meaningful experience. The survey asked them to check whether they had thought about the story they learned the previous week, had not thought about it, had prayed with it, had showed their storyboard to anyone, or had told it. The results are displayed in the following chart:



A significant number of women indicated that they had thought about the story. The fact that a number said they had not thought about it reflects a comfort level with the program that they can share honestly. It contributes to a sense of validity about the data. Since the women filled out this same survey every week, they were implicitly encouraged to think about the story and their engagement, or lack of engagement, with it during the week. It was interesting that no one prayed with the story. This is an area for further development.

While the percentage of women who reported telling the story was low, the fact that any did is meaningful. They were given no assignment or stated expectation to tell outside the Circle time other than the caveat they were often given when the guideline of confidentiality was explained: "...of course we hope you *will* go out and tell the *story* to your friends, your family, your cellmates..." Before the Opening of Session Seven two women excitedly shared how they had told the story in another Bible study class.

Feedback during closing interviews at CCI indicated meaningful impact of Circle of the Word on participants through engagement with the stories. In comparing this program to other Bible studies the Encourager commented that while they may listen to the story in other studies they do not get engaged. He said, "There is no talking piece, no chime" and noted that "the drawings are very helpful" for engaging the men. He

described a time when two men sought him out to tell him they had seen a TV program that included the scene about Peter's ear being cut off which they had just learned. They spoke with "excitement, energy, life." One man reported in his journal during the third week about his experience of telling the story to a peer: "I told my story to [inmate name]. He told me I did a good job and I had no trouble remembering any of the story. A lot of the story I feel like I can put it in my life." The storytelling was understood not just to be about performance, but about impacting life.

Richard Boone, who works closely with the men as the Horizon Initiative Coordinator at CCI and, confirmed the high degree of engagement with scripture resulting from the course: "For most of the men this is the most engaged they have ever been with a Bible story. They personally put more into understanding and reflecting on a specific story than they have ever done before." Boone has extensive prison ministry experience. He had been present during program sessions as well as in regular contact with participants outside class. His evaluation is well grounded and significant.

When asked for his opinion about what value the course would have for people who are incarcerated one participant replied, "If they are sincere it has a lot of value" and went on to elaborate that internalizing the stories this way is the occasion for "a lot of insight—it brings you closer to the scriptures and gives better understanding." He emphasized, "the stories give insight...it is just the tip of the iceberg." Speaking of his own experience he said, "It drew my interest" so he thought to himself, "Let me get back in this, see what's going on." He summed up his opinion about the depth of impact by saying, "When the class is over, the class is still going on." And he was not referring to homework assignments.

The virtue of hope was a focus of this project, especially as it related to the stories of Jesus. The Goals Scale administered to the men before the course began showed a relatively high level of hopeful thinking among the men. Only one man registered low on the scale. It may be that the men in the Horizon program are prone to hopeful thinking or are hopeful because they are in the program. This scale was not re-administered after the course for reasons stated in the Methods section, so it is not possible to make comparative judgment with regard to the course. Since Horizon offers so many new and different experiences for incarcerated men (compared to life in the general prison population) it would have been impossible to make valid claims about the impact of the Sacred Stories course from a post-test administration of the Goals Scale. Nevertheless, there is some regret for not having done so.

A survey administered to both the men at CCI and the women at MCJ asked for a rating of the session that day in relation to increased hopefulness. Over sixty percent of both men and women gave the highest rating. One man who gave the highest rating wrote “greatly” next to the category “increased my hopefulness.” A man who gave a midpoint rating added an explanatory comment to indicate that this was an increase: “I started the class with zero hope.” A survey administered to the men following the course asked for a rating of how much the course had contributed to their feeling more hopeful about their lives. Ten out of the thirteen men gave a positive response with fifty-four percent giving it the highest rating.

There were also unsolicited references to hope. In reflecting on the impact of learning the stories of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection one man said that it renewed hope. Then he went on to elaborate how:

It renews a hope. Knowing his own disciples didn't live up to what they think they should do. It's the same with me. Even though I have [made mistakes] I can still be used in a positive way. [The stories we learned in the course] remind me of that. You forget over time—get worn out, worn down. Hearing it new and fresh definitely renews.

During Check-Out one woman said she was now feeling “Hope about eternal life, not only for myself but for everyone” and in another session a woman’s Check-Out word was “hopeful.” The generic “Comments” section on the “Feedback on Class” survey administered to the women at the close of one Circle session elicited this comment: “I was feeling hopeless. Now I am somewhat better.” If she were the only one who had that experience the model would have proved its worth.

But she would not be the only one. During a post-project continuation of the Sacred Stories program other women incarcerated at the jail echoed her sentiments. At the closing of the December 31, 2014 circle the eleven women in attendance gave feedback on the five-week series called “Journey to Bethlehem.” The series had culminated that day with the story of Jesus’ birth from Luke 2:1-7. All the women had attended at least two classes. Two of them specified hope as a result of participation. One said that the class “makes me feel peaceful and hopeful.” The other gave particularly interesting feedback, commenting that the class “brought me out of my self—it makes me hopeful.” According to the categories of core virtues in human life identified by positive psychologists, hope is sub-category of transcendence. This woman intuited and named the relationship between transcendence (“the class brought me out of my self”) and hope (“it makes me hopeful”).

There were also spontaneous references to the three elements of hopeful thinking: goals, pathways, and agency—though not necessarily named that way. As previously

mentioned, one man reported with conviction, “It helped define my purpose.” An articulate expression of how the course impacted hopeful thinking came in the context of the final interview question on what difference it made in their life to know the story of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection. Here is an excerpt:

Now with incarceration I have strengthened my desire to deal with my spiritual stuff. My issue always revolved around spirituality. I came to deal with my lack of spirituality, 'cause I know if I deal with that it makes me a better person. This course supported that goal. It did that for me.

Other men spoke thoughtfully as they answered the question about the impact of learning Mark’s story of Jesus. Here is a sampling—each is from a different participant during the post-course interview:

- Helped me understand and connect with the passion of Christ and each person involved in his life
- Lots of wondering. How much love he had for Judas...A lot of reflecting—go all the way back to my childhood remembering some things that happened; asked my mom about my dad. Made me settle down and think about what I'm doing. Faith helps a lot. Not a question of what if there really is a god up there, but what am I going to do? Before I came to prison I thought there's no way there can be a God.
- Got me close to Jesus...that he laid down his life for me. In my heart it makes a difference.
- It makes all the difference in the world. As a child I was brought up in the church. I allowed myself to stray. To know the suffering he endured for those thirty-some years I was astray. He did it for me so I can hold my head up and be rejoicing, be assured everything is "Blessed Assurance." That's what it means to me.
- Shows how valuable we are that he would do that...So through all that torture and pain and how he refused to take the pain medicine.
- I got twin daughters. Once you can tell a story to your kids they won't forget it, make it fun. If you can touch your kids, they tell their friends, "My daddy told me a story." Individuals in prison—lure them in through your telling so they read—give them hope.

All but one of the men in the program had previous knowledge of the stories we were engaging, so the course was not the only source of their reflections, but it certainly was a significant one.

While the reported experience, expression of opinions, and ministry model assessment given by the incarcerated participants is highly valuable for evaluating the results of the project, so also are those of the outside participants. This would include the Horizon Coordinator, the assistant Circlekeepers for the jail program, and the MCJ Chaplain. All reported positively about the ministry model in post-program interviews.

Willie Templeton, Chaplain and Program Coordinator at the jail, did not attend a Circle session, but received feedback from women who did and was familiar with the model through the program proposal process. Here is an excerpt from his comments in response to a question about how the program related to his goals as a chaplain:

- I'm concerned about their spiritual well-being. I'm concerned that whatever state they're in when they come in, if they come across my path, whether it be through me personally, or whether it be through you and your class, is that when they leave, they leave better than when they came. And that goes back to my statement about seed and water. Because I understand that I may not see the fruit of my labor; you may not see the fruit of yours—you may never see these folks again. However, who knows? Young lady could have been sitting in your class today who is getting out tomorrow, could be moving to Alaska in three months and get to Alaska and become one of the most dynamic evangelists that we ever met! . . .
- So my goal is that spiritually that these folks are well. And that the classes that we offer, the Bible studies we offer help cultivate, or help feed the inmate to be well, to be better . . .
- Honestly I'm extremely pleased with what you guys are doing. I appreciate everything that you guys are doing; the jail appreciates what you are doing.

This positive assessment of Sacred Stories was not automatic. Templeton does not indiscriminately praise or endorse religious programming. He is all too familiar with the

potential for leaders to be self righteous or judgmental and for communication to be one-way. Therefore, his evaluation is very meaningful.

Three members of Grace Church assisted with leading Sacred Stories sessions on a rotating basis and evaluated the program within a month after completion. They observed that the women “blossomed during the time” and were “uplifted” by it. They also observed the women’s enjoyment and gratitude. Their careful statements about the value and benefits of the program for the women included the following:

- They learn stories. Some heard, for the first time, of God’s love. They perhaps realize that others believe they have value. They get some time when they can interact as people and not prisoners.
- The value to the participants is that they can see God’s love at work, they have a chance to listen to and learn stories that may be meaningful to them. They can take part in a variety of learning activities, which can be fun.

These statements are in continuity with Templeton’s understanding of that which fosters spiritual growth (and that which does not): “What helps cultivate an inmate’s relationship with God is the coming in with a loving heart, sharing the love of God, giving them the truth, but not coming across with an iron fist.” The Grace Church assistant Circlekeepers experienced the Circle as a time when God’s love was generously shared with women in jail.

Richard Boone’s final evaluation of the “Breath of Fresh Air” project was particularly important because of his extensive experience in prison ministry as an elder in the United Methodist Church, his knowledge of scripture as a Ph.D. in New Testament, his Christ-like relationship with the men of Horizon, and his first-hand observation of Circle of the Word over a nine-month period. In many cases Boone’s comments find

common ground in data gathered from the men themselves. In no case was there a contradiction.

Employing the concept of “paradigm shift” Boone described a dynamic akin to Cranton’s sense of transformational learning as he began his assessment of how the men had responded to the program:

They sang fun songs they learned in class around the dorm. The fun, maybe even silly things in class that they brought out into the day-to-day life of the Horizon community. They really enjoy this and at some level it is a profound paradigm shift for them. They can live and relate in joy and not anger and fear.

His listing of values and benefits of the course included confirmation that internalizing the PDR story increases hope:

- One of the benefits is definitely getting the men to study a passage.
- Second, the story of Jesus’ death is now much more personal to them. They can identify with the trial, arrest, and sentencing. They can relate that to their own life experiences.
- Third, they have a positive emotional memory of being engaged with the Bible. For most they even have fun songs and activities they now relate to the Bible.
- Fourth, they have a place to relate their own experience of suffering to the story of Jesus’ death. Their life has more meaning and hope because they now can see how it can relate to Jesus.

The way in which the Sacred Stories course resulted in men identifying with Jesus’ experience, relating Jesus’ experience to their lives, and thereby acquiring meaning and hope suggests that the course facilitates the processes of “keying” and “framing” as conceptualized by social memory theorists. This possibility deserves further exploration. The following is a beginning discussion of basic concepts in social memory theory and initial analysis of how social memory theory informs what happens in a Circle of the Word.

In social memory theory “keying” is a technical word for “identifying.” Tom Thatcher defines it as “the act of associating, often unconsciously, a present person, event, institution, or experience to a past counterpart.”⁹ The keyed entity, along with the values of that entity, then become a frame for understanding and guiding present experience. While the past and the present never merge completely, the present informs the past and the past informs the present. An instance of this phenomenon at work in the “Breath of Fresh Air” project was described during the group discussion of course values: “You take on the spiritual values of the characters; for example, the lady who anointed Jesus, she showed what Christianity is all about. She was an example of having that kind of spirit.” The man who gave this input advocated taking on “that kind of spirit” himself.

The act of forming associations between present and past counterparts was not left to unconscious activity, even though the “tip of the iceberg” comment previously quoted bears witness to awareness of such activity. On the contrary it was intentionally prompted by particular Circle activities and journal assignments. Relating one’s personal life experience to the past experience of Jesus, his disciples, the women, and other “keyed entities” was evident in the Connections activity during Circle sessions at both the jail and the prison. The language of framing was used to conclude the “Connections” exercise, with participants encouraged to hear the story one last time in the context of the experiences they had just described out loud or reflected upon in silence. They were also invited to let the biblical story be a frame in which to hold their personal story.

⁹ Tom Thatcher, ed., *Memory and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014), 3.

Prompted associations were present in a number of the men's journals. For Week Three, the journal assignment was to reflect on any one or more of four possible connections to the story of "The Arrest" (Mark 14: 43-52). One man wrote about his experience of lashing out at an adversary in anger in connection with the disciple who drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Below is his entry, shared with permission (spelling is corrected and some punctuation added to assist reading):

I remember one time when me and two other people were in the cell and we were talking about different faiths. One of them was Wicca. He started saying that we were all wrong and Jesus was fake. That made me so mad I stand up and told him a bunch of choice words. "I will not listen to that crap," I started yelling at him. I just about put my hands on him. But at the time I felt like that I walked off. I don't know why I walked off, I just did. Now I look back and wonder why I took that to the level it went to. It was wrong for me to lash out like that. Jesus would not have done that and I should not have either. I ask him [the Wicca] to forgive me for this. I didn't mean to do that. My passion just took me over. After I prayed I went and apologized to this person.

This was the end of the journal entry. At the closing interview I asked the author of the journal entry how the Wicca had responded to his apology. He replied, "He looked at me. Then he said, 'That's okay' and put his fist up for a fist bump." For anyone familiar with normal prison culture, this story of alienation, conflict, and reconciliation across boundaries stands out as a witness to an alternative reality, much like Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God.

While the men had more opportunity to internalize the stories, these dynamics were apparent for the women as well. One of the assistant Circlekeepers at the jail noted "Their ability to relate the biblical story to their lives" in her evaluation of the program. Following one session a woman commented, "I never before thought of myself as a disciple." On the day of learning the story of Jesus' trial the women chuckled at the end

of class when the corrections officer's voice came over the speaker. "There's Pilate," they joked. When an officer came to the door to take the women back to their cells they said, "There's the soldiers!" In the last session on the resurrection story of Jesus appearing to his disciples behind locked doors the women provided a gesture for "retain" as hands cuffed behind the back. Many of the women readily related to dynamics in the stories given the time and space to attend to them in detail.

Richard Boone identified how the program had supported the four goals of the Horizon Initiative (printed in bold):

- One of the goals of Horizon is to **become a man of faith**. Engaging the sacred Scriptures certainly is a foundational spiritual discipline. Also they were brought to a place where they can personally relate the life of Jesus to their own life.
- Second of the goals of Horizon is to **be part of a functioning family**. During the class they were a family. They learned to share at a deep level and receive love.
- Third goal of Horizon is to **deal with the reality of what brought you to prison**. The time they spent reflecting on suffering as it relates to Jesus can be a paradigm shift for them.
- Fourth goal of Horizon is to **contribute to the community**. The invitation to sing, share what they learned with someone else, and to be part of the epic telling helped them see that they can make a contribution to a Christian community.

Boone's discussion of the character of Bible studies and/or spiritual growth classes common in prison settings and how the Sacred Stories program compares revealed distinctive characteristics of the *Breath of Fresh Air* ministry model:

- Most of the religious services in prison are outside groups coming in once and performing. It is one-way communication based on the needs of the outside group.
- There are good Bible study groups. Some of these are driven by a desire to convince the inmates of the correct doctrine of the outside group (the Jehovah witness Bible study). Other Bible studies are content driven intended to raise up the level of understanding of the inmates.

- In short there are few places where what the needs, thoughts and desires of the inmates are part of the class sessions. This biblical story telling had a straight-forward goal of engaging the inmates in a specific story, but it also took them into consideration. What they thought mattered. I would guess that this class is different than 98% of what is offered inside the prison.

It is not only the telling of the sacred story that matters in a Circle of the Word. It is also the telling of one's personal or communal story. The healing of memories, social cohesion and appropriation of new identity are facilitated by internalization of the PDR narrative. Internalization of a narrative is, as recounted by Barry Schwartz, "to define oneself in its terms." The data from this project suggest that this can and has happened through the Circle of the Word process.

The last section of this report on project results concerns local church involvement. While developing a detention ministry at Grace was not a primary focus of the "Breath of Fresh Air" research project, it was an envisioned goal for the future and did factor as a secondary focus of the project. Two questions guided data analysis on this topic:

1. Was it possible to build a local church ministry into the model?
2. What was the impact of the program on the congregation?

To address the first question, a project decision was made to recruit Grace members to function as assistant Circlekeepers on a rotating basis. But which was the best venue for their participation?

The prison program is a full day commitment including three hours driving time. Getting from the parking lot to the Horizon dorm at CCI involves substantial walking and stair climbing. Building a team of partners for that venue seemed unlikely as a sustainable ministry for an older congregation. The county jail, on the other hand, would

involve little more than a two-hour commitment and is readily accessible, even for those who are physically challenged. Furthermore, it is part of the Grace Church community, less than two miles away. The only drawback was that team membership was limited to women. Current jail policy does not permit women to lead programs with male inmates.

At the outset of the feasibility study, three Grace members were asked to be part of the “Breath of Fresh Air” project. Two of them agreed, underwent the necessary screening procedures for approval, and began participating in the program. By the time the project began a third woman decided to join the Grace team. A rotation schedule was established with the church members participating as assistant Circlekeepers two or three weeks in a row. A fourth assistant who belongs to a different church joined the leadership. She came every week of the project. Her consistency was valuable for both the women and the project. As a Doctor of Ministry graduate, her input at post-class debriefings was very helpful. She was not, however, able to be present for the final team evaluation process. The church members came faithfully on schedule, contributing greatly through both presence and participation. They also shared their observations and suggestions in post-class debriefings.

None of the three Grace team members had ever been in a jail or prison before, nor were aware of knowing anyone who had been incarcerated. All were apprehensive about what to expect when they first began, but determined to participate as best they could. One had worked for three months in a state mental institution as part of her nurse’s training when she was young. She had a frightening experience “behind massive locked doors with people who often felt they didn’t belong there” and took some time to consider whether or not she thought she could join the team because of her concern about

being in a locked space with troubled people. Her response to these questions is the first one listed below. The questions being addressed are “How was this program for you?

Were there any surprises? Did you learn anything?” Here are the responses:

- I was able to interact with the women without judgment that I thought about prior to my first visit. After much prayer to decide to participate in this ministry, I was wrapped in comfort when I came to the jail.
- It was a great life experience learning something about women in jail, how they related to us, to the story, to the other women. I was surprised at how articulate and grateful they were. I learned how much we women, of any circumstance, are alike.
- I was surprised by how other-oriented the women were—wanting to help with others’ problems even while coping with their own. The laughter was a surprising gift, as well, and I think was healing. I learned that we truly all have value.

In conversation about their written reflections the powerful and positive impact of participation in Sacred Stories was evident. All three agreed to continue the ministry and strongly endorsed it as a structural part of Grace Church. Their endorsement was significant since these women are all leaders within the congregation. Transformational learning as a result of the “Breath of Fresh Air Project” has not been limited to the incarcerated participants. It has also been a result for outside participants, perhaps most especially for the researcher.

In less than three months the emerging jail ministry at Grace United Methodist Church had been named “Seeds of Grace.” Development funds had been applied for and granted by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. An intercessory prayer ministry had been initiated to support the women who attend Sacred Stories classes. Furthermore, since project completion, two Circlekeepers have led Sacred Stories sessions on their own. Thus, the answer to the first question—“Was it possible to build a local church ministry into the model?”—is an unqualified “Yes.”

A significant impact of the program on the congregation was to begin a new ministry that offers church members the opportunity to grow in discipleship, serve marginalized individuals, and impact the system of mass incarceration. In their written evaluations, the assistant Circlekeepers identified ways in which Circle of the Word relates to the mission and ministry of the church.:

- The Bible tells us very directly to visit those in jail. It is a ministry of love, mercy, and teaching so we may be God's instrument in this situation. It helps us overcome feelings of us versus them, affirm that we are all God's children. Also, it helps us know the importance of reaching out to others...
- Encouragement to reach out beyond the church walls
- It is feeding God's sheep with spiritual and emotional nurture. It is siding with the sheep, and not the goats, and visiting Jesus in jail. It is caring for our sisters in Christ.

These parallel words echo like fulfilled prophecy the scripture from Matthew 25:35-36 with which *Pilgrims of Grace*, the two-volume record of Grace Church's history, ended forty years ago.

Since the project ended, two additional Circlekeepers have stepped forward to join the Seeds of Grace team. The team has met to discuss policy, evaluate how things are going, engage in political advocacy for restorative justice, and celebrate the wonder of God's persistent work of redemption. The Monday morning prayer group which meets at the church receives index cards with prayer requests (and sometimes expressions of gratitude) from each woman attending the previous week's class. Besides providing spiritual support for the women, two other reasons the prayer group was invited to connect with Sacred Stories were to: (1) develop a way that church members could be involved in Seeds of Grace besides attending class, and (2) share with the Circlekeepers the burden of bearing the sorrow, shame, and brokenness so obvious in the lives of

women who attend Sacred Stories. The women are prayed for by the group on Monday morning. The cards are distributed to group members for daily prayer throughout the week. Grace's senior pastor, Rev. Sherry Gale, PhD., is a member of the prayer group and has observed how these cards have impacted it:

Through the prayer ministry for the women our Grace prayer group has connected with a world outside themselves. This connection has brought a growth in the prayer group participants' understanding and experience of God's love and God's people. The prayer group participants begin to see the commonality of the prayer concerns of God's people from all different life experiences and backgrounds and we experience an amazing unity in our diversity.¹⁰

A breath of fresh air seems to be blowing through the aging halls of majestic Grace Church as well as in the prison and the jail.

Validation

Several validity strategies listed by Creswell were used in this project to maximize accuracy of results.¹¹ Data sources were **triangulated**. Numerous data collection methods were employed including surveys, interviews, journaling and Focus Group discussion. Furthermore, the program was implemented in two detention settings. There were, therefore, multiple ways to come at the same information, for example, attitudes toward the various Circle components. When all the data points to the same conclusion, there is a high degree of confidence in the validity of that conclusion.

Member checking is a method of validating data where a report or specific descriptions or themes are shown to participants for their assessment of accuracy. This

¹⁰ Email communication, December 12, 2014. Used with permission(

¹¹ The validation strategies identified by bold text in this section are all discussed by Creswell, 201-203.

validation strategy was not applied to the PDR project itself. However it was used with regard to the feasibility study. Participants in the feasibility study affirmed the accuracy of a narrative description involving them. Future research will include plans to engage member checking as a validation strategy as well as a method of building trust between participants and the researcher.

The narrative description of an episode in the feasibility study is also an example of the use of **rich, thick description** to validate research. Such descriptions were also employed to describe project settings and in the Results section of this chapter.

Discrepant information was included in those few instances where any was encountered, for example in the chaplain's interview. **Peer debriefing** and **external auditing** was built into the project process through regular reports to the Doctor of Ministry peer group, context group, and professional associates.

Conclusion

Using the conceptual framework articulated by Patricia Cranton in her book on *Professional Development as Transformative Learning*, these results suggest that participants in a Circle of the Word process at the prison, where a comprehensive, sustained, and stable group experience was possible, achieved a significant degree of “communicative learning.” It fostered the acquisition of “practical knowledge” about such things as “social norms, traditions, values, and mutual understanding among individuals” or as Cranton explains it more simply, “their desire to understand others and

to be understood.”¹² Both by their own witness and that of their Coordinator, they bonded as a group and strengthened emerging values. Furthermore, some, at least, experienced a paradigm shift in personal formation. They achieved transformational learning.

The women in the jail, by virtue of the nature of jail populations and program realities, were not likely to achieve significant communicative or transformational learning through a nine-week series of classes. If they had, it was not apparent how to track it. Certainly, though, seeds were cast and water provided. The data does indicate that many women were positively impacted by the classes they were able to attend. At the very least, they had a reprieve from their troubles and a glimpse of new possibilities.

It is clear from comments made both at the prison and at the jail that outsiders who provide programming are greatly appreciated by inmates just for coming. This raises the question of how large a role the actual program played in their positive assessment. The quantity and consistency of positive response over a wide range of data collection methods was striking. There was a compelling forthrightness about the feedback given by participants, rarely a sense of things being said just to please. Furthermore, implementation of the model at the church provided a control factor. Participants there also gave positive feedback to the overall model. This suggests that the processes, activities and content of a Circle of the Word program was a significant target of the inmates’ affirmation.

¹² Patricia Cranton, *Professional Development as Transformative Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 18.

The “Breath of Fresh Air” project was designed to explore a hunch that a biblical storytelling workshop using peacemaking circle processes could address the brokenness represented by mass incarceration and make a positive difference in the lives of those directly impacted by it. Results of project data unambiguously demonstrate that the Circle workshops did make a positive difference in the lives of persons directly impacted by mass incarceration. But what about the systemic issues? The telling, teaching, and playful enjoyment of biblical stories seem to be an unlikely way to impact the behemoth of mass incarceration in the United States. Does this project really have anything to say about the monster in the closet?

Bryan Stevenson has addressed the ills of mass incarceration by directing the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama, teaching at New York University Law School, and litigating on behalf of condemned prisoners, the poor, and people of color. In his new book entitled *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Stevenson writes,

I have discovered, deep in the hearts of many condemned and incarcerated people, the scattered traces of hope and humanity—seeds of restoration that come to astonishing life when nurtured by very simple interventions.¹³

This action research project at least suggests the potential for biblical storytelling pedagogy to be such a simple intervention. It does seem to have brought a breath of fresh air into the state prison and the county jail.

¹³ Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 17.

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